

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“A Symphony of Gifts”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, May 31, 2020

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

I Corinthians 12:3-13

Therefore, I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says ‘Let Jesus be cursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open ourselves to You and to the gift and power and joy of Your Spirit. I pray that You would take all that we are carrying within, all the words that we offer in song and in prayer, through our reading of Scripture and through the words that I'm about to preach. Take all of these words and, by Your Spirit, transform them into Your word, the word of Christ our Lord, and let that word speak to us. Let Christ's word dwell in our hearts and in our minds and in our souls. Let Christ's word nourish our faith and nurture our well-being. Let Christ's word call us into service to our neighbors, to our loved ones, and to all those who have need in this world. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

Six months ago or maybe even more when I thought about preaching on this Pentecost Sunday and having read the text again from Acts and 1 Corinthians and sitting quietly and sort of asking God, "What is it that you want me to talk about?" the idea of a symphony of gifts came, the symphony where each person, as it says in Corinthians, has given a different aspect of the Spirit. Some could speak in tongues. Some could teach. Some could interpret tongues. Some could do on and on, the list goes. But it says repeatedly that these gifts are given by the same Spirit. And then, it goes on to tell us that because of the Spirit, just as the body of Christ has many members, we now are one together, each of us with different gifts. And so, I thought that today, I would preach about the celebration of those gifts that each of us has. But instead, in this season of pandemic and in this time of civil unrest and protest, I decided to change the title of my sermon to 8 Minutes 46 Seconds.

As I thought about preaching the original sermon, I need to confess that I always have a somewhat nostalgic view of Pentecost. As it says in the Book of Acts, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly, from heaven, there came a sound like the rushing of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house. Divided tongues as a fire appeared among them, a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Spirit. And they all began to talk and hear a common language spoken in their own tongue." They understood each other, even though they didn't speak the same language. And on this day of Pentecost, we celebrate the gift of the fire, the Spirit coming down. It's almost like a conference of academics gathering in Chicago to understand the coronavirus and how to overcome it or defeat it or at least make it stop killing people and spreading so wildly, could imagine scientists flying in from all over the world, people who speak hundreds of different languages, yet when they come together in a conference through the work of interpreters, translators, and their own ability to understand English, all participants are able to talk and learn together, that there is this gathering of goodness where they begin to speak and understand one another, but that image started to shift for me, and instead the image that came was like a group of scouts gathered in the wilderness on a starry night, huddled around a campfire, cooking s'mores, kids were singing and laughing and eating and enjoying each other's company and trying to smear each other with melted marshmallows and chocolate and they were being warmed by the fire. In fact, their interactions with each other were so good their focus was only on what was going on right in front of them. And they didn't notice the smell in the air. They didn't notice that the warmth was coming not only from their front but they could feel it on their backs. They didn't realize that a fire had begun in the forest behind them, a fire that if unchecked would continue to grow. They didn't know.

I've always made it a point to be apolitical in my preaching. I decided a long time ago, even before I came to First Pres Kirkwood that to preach politics was a sure invitation to divide a church to cause harm to the body of Christ. So instead I came to see the church as a sanctuary, a time where the news that dominates our common life would be expelled. I wanted to create a safe place of respite, a true sanctuary from the tug and pull of competing political views or the salacious or gruesome nature of what often constitutes the news that we see, read, and hear about today. I'm a minister of word and sacrament, an evangelist, someone who shares, promotes, and invites people to live in the goodness of God's loving grace. I wanted to create a place and I have I believe created a place where good news prevails and bad news is never addressed. But this week, I've wondered about being lulled into a complacency and seduced by the comforts of living in suburbia. I wonder about paying too much attention to the peacefulness we enjoy together and my desire to promote that peacefulness rather than the need at times to speak out. I wonder about

my desire to be liked by all of you or my desire to not be attacked by some of you for preaching about topics that I know may cause division or hurt or where we don't see things the same. I wonder if I've shirked my responsibilities as a minister, a preacher, evangelist, and even as a neighbor. I remember a time when I preached about the historic nature of Obama's winning of the presidency. Working hard in the pulpit to not be too excited or overly supportive, to not waive the Democratic flag in the face of Republicans. I was just focusing on the historic fact that a person of color had just become the president of the United States of America. Something that has never happened in our nation's history. And at the conclusion of worship that Sunday, as I stood by the back door with the organ playing the postlude, an angry congregant almost ran up to me and got right in my face, "Dr. Holyan, don't you ever bring your politics into my church." My response, probably a little too heated than I would desire was, "As Presbyterians, the preacher can preach whatever he or she feels like sharing, and if you don't like it, there's the door." And I pointed to the door leading to the parking lot. Just because I named that history has just occurred in our midst.

There was also a time when I received an email. It wasn't an admonishment, it was just more of a, sort of a, "Hey, why did you do this?", because I didn't mention on Sunday a national call to pray for Donald Trump, issued by Franklin Graham. And I responded by being quite honest. I had not heard of any call to pray for the president, and that was the truth. What I wanted to say that day was that Franklin Graham, for me, isn't considered a beacon of Christian authority, not someone that I pay attention to. And I know that any mention of Donald Trump or AOC or the notorious RGB may cause some of you to constrict internally, to wince, to shake your head in disapproval, and to ask or utter, "Oh no, where's he going now." But I feel that we live in this time and this day on this Pentecost when it's important to speak up. When it's important for all of us to consider the price that we are paying by not speaking up.

In 2014, Eric Garner, a black man in New York City was placed in a chokehold. He told officers repeatedly, "I can't breathe." He died because of his arrest. Not long ago, Ahmad Arbery was jogging down a street in Atlanta. Three white men, George McMichael, Travis McMichael, and William Bryan, decided that he had robbed some places and that they needed to apprehend him. They got their guns, got in the truck, set up a trap, in essence, stopped the man and, in the tussle, they ended up killing him. For months, the three white men were not charged. It was only after a large outcry on social media and in newspapers and from a variety of forms, and probably the release of a video that actually showed his killing, were these three men arrested and charged. And this week, it happened again, just as it happens across our country far too many times. This time it happened again, and there was again a video. George Floyd, a black man in Minneapolis, with his hands behind his back, his face down in the street, and an officer pressing his knee on the neck of Mr. Floyd for eight minutes and 46 seconds. Mr. Floyd repeatedly told Officer Chauvin, "I can't breathe," and the officer continued to press his knee into his neck. The video shows that Mr. Floyd was clearly in the control of the police officers who were present on the scene. As bystanders and even other officers asked Officer Chauvin to get his knee off Mr. Floyd's neck, he did not heed those calls. After an officer checked for a pulse on Mr. Floyd and could not find it, Officer Chauvin continued to keep his knee pressed against Mr. Floyd for another two minutes. In total, eight minutes and 46 seconds. And now our news is filled with images of civil unrest, of police stations and cars and business on fire, of groups gathered in protests during the day and at night, of confrontation between these groups and the police, rubber bullets, tear gas, bottles, rocks flying back and forth. Chaos, in a sense, erupting in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Atlanta, New York, and here in Ferguson, in our own community again. Our neighbors are gathering to protest what the police are able to do. In researching for this sermon, I found that only 3% of police are ever charged when a person in their custody is killed. Only 1% are ever found guilty of that charge. 97% of the time, the police walked away uncharged and free after taking another's life. Then reading the comments about the protests in Minneapolis, the mayor suggested that it was an outside element that was causing the violence. And I understand that desire, you don't want to inflame it by saying that it's us doing this. It's easier to blame it on someone outside. This morning on television, National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien, said that it was just a few bad apples in the police departments that give police a bad reputation. And while I agree with that, it is just a few cops when you think about the hundreds of thousands of police officers in our nation.

Again, there's a pushing away and an excusing, it's just a few bad apples. It's not us. So I've been wondering on this day of Pentecost, on this day where God pours out God's Spirit and it looks like fire landing on people's heads, I wonder if the protests that have occurred in Minneapolis and New York and Atlanta, and even here, where we see the power, where we see buildings ablaze and tear gas burning the eyes, I wonder if we can stop for a moment. I wonder if we can stop for a moment in the midst of this horror and check ourselves? Because I heard something I

had never heard before when I said, "How could they do that to their own community?" A question I am guessing I'm not alone in asking. But as I heard myself say that, I saw the problem. I saw the racism. The racism that rears up in our hearts, in our lives that we work so hard to not own. I didn't ask, "why are we protesting? Why are we creating civil unrest? What are we standing up for? What are we asking for?" And so for a moment, I did the unthinkable. I asked, "what if these fires that we see raging are not just senseless destruction? But what if they're somehow an invitation for all of us?"

While I do not condone violence or the destruction of property, I wondered for an instant, a moment, "What if we see all of this unrest as an expression of anger and outrage and a call for justice?" I wonder if, in this season of Pentecost, in a season of pandemics and a time of civil unrest and protests, I wonder if this Pentecost if we could all see the fires raging around our nation as an invitation to stop thinking it's someone else or it's out there, but instead if we could see it as a call, a cry for justice from all of us, from all of us to any institution or group which takes the lives of others. At almost every level of my being, it's unthinkable that this destruction and unrest is somehow the work of the Spirit of God. But I've been wondering this week if I'm wrong. Amen.