“Raise Your Voice”

May 31, 2020

John 7:37-39

Acts 2:1-21

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It's been a hard week. A hard week that has followed a series of hard weeks, which have turned into hard months.

We’ve seen our schedules turned upside down. We’ve seen our interactions with people change. We’ve seen the best and the worst of our society.

But today is Pentecost — a day of celebration and joy. The day in which we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit upon those gathered in a room in Jerusalem so long ago. The day that signifies the birth of the Christian Church.

If this had been a typical Pentecost, we’d fill this sanctuary with reds — crimson, burgundy, rose, vermillion. Perhaps we would have had some youth lead us into the opening hymn by waving our streamer banners. Maybe we’d sing “Happy Birthday” to the Church during our children’s message and maybe we’d enjoy a time of fellowship together after worship by cutting a piece of Costco birthday cake and making sure John had the piece with the most icing and me with the least.

It *is* Pentecost today, whether it feels like it or not, whether we can gather together or not. I don’t think you can see on the video right now, but we’ve hung the Pentecost banners. John and I are wearing our red stoles today. I’m wearing my red shoes that I bought specifically for Pentecost and ordination. John’s wearing his, too. We *are* singing Pentecost hymns and we’re trying our best to provide some sort of that Pentecost feeling.

But still. Still. I don’t know about you, but I’m just not in a celebratory mood these days.

We’ve passed 100,000 deaths due to Covid-19.

1 in 4 American workers are jobless.

Choosing to wear a mask is deemed a political stance.

Yet another person of color has died in police custody.

And cities around our nation are burning.

No. I don’t feel like eating cake and waving banners this Pentecost. I don’t feel much like celebrating.

But maybe 2000 years after that first Pentecost, we’ve forgotten what we *should* have been celebrating anyway.

On that first Pentecost, there is a gathering in a room in Jerusalem. We don’t know exactly who is in the room. It could be the 12 apostles (with Mathias added in Judas’s place). It could be a larger group. It could be all men. It could be both men and women. We don’t know.

What we do know is that they had been waiting. They were waiting for their holy orders. Waiting for the Holy Spirit to come upon them to empower them to witness in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. They were waiting.

And then this wonderfully chaotic scene takes place.

The Holy Spirit rushes in and the cacophony begins.

Wait. Cacophony isn’t the right word.

Breaking that word up into its parts — Cacophony literally means “bad sound.” Think: middle school band room. Think: a traffic jam with everyone honking their horns. Think: all the ducks and geese squawking at each other in the park. *That’s* cacophony.

What happened on that first Pentecost is anything but bad. Yes, it was chaotic, but what it *meant* was beautiful.

Not cacophony. Euphony. Mellifluous. Harmonious. *Good.*

The sound was beautiful in its chaos because it demonstrated that not just the Galileans who had followed Jesus all this time were going to receive the Holy Spirit. It demonstrated that God’s transformational love was to be offered to *everyone* — to the ends of the earth.

The chaos of those voices lifted in a multitude of language, reaching out to those who hadn’t yet heard the Good News, was indeed a beautiful thing. Not bad, but good.

There’s a prayer tradition in the Korean church called Tongsung Kido. When a congregation prays in this way, all of the people in the church are invited to pray aloud at the same time. Tongsung means “cry out together loudly.” And that’s what they do. The tradition comes from the Korean experience of suffering and pain and so out of their pain and sadness, they cry out with loud voices to God, expressing their emotions, their struggles, their petitions.

We had a fairly large population of Korean students at Columbia where I attended seminary and I had the privilege of witnessing this form of prayer once. It was deeply moving and beautiful. My Korean classmates, many of whom rarely spoke in class most likely due to a language barrier, gathered tightly together in the front of the room and they all began to cry out to God in Korean. It was loud. It was discomforting at first. But once I got over the fact that I didn’t understand the language, I started to understand their prayers. I understood the emotions behind them. I understood the passions that were directed toward God. From a quiet Southern Presbyterian perspective, at first it seemed like cacophony, but transformed into harmony.

In that moment, I understood what it meant to cry out to God, to raise my voice. I understood what a profound gift the Holy Spirit was to the Christian community at Pentecost.

The gift of the Holy Spirit on that first Pentecost was the gift of speech, not of silence. It was a gift of prophecy, which means truth-telling, not just for the few, but for the gathered community.

Because of the gift of the Holy Spirit, the first apostles are able to share the Word of God - a word of liberation and of love with the entire world. As a result, 3000 people join the apostles and the first Christians that day. As a result of speech, God’s invitation of love is extended beyond the four walls of that room, 50 days after the resurrection.

The Holy Spirit enabled people across many different cultural and national divides to hear the Good News of Christ’s death and resurrection in their own languages. Today’s text from Acts is often paired with the story of the Tower of Babel, in which the people of God sought to build a tower to heaven in order to be with God. As a result, God scatters the people and confuses their language so that they cannot understand each other. Confusion surrounds them.

But on Pentecost, as Jana Childers points out, “Whereas Babel’s reach was vertical, through the story of Luke-Acts, the realm of God expands horizontally.”[[1]](#footnote-2) The realm of God expands through the gift of speech that day.

We need to remember that the gift of speech is bestowed upon us, too. Like Peter raising his voice over the critics and naysayers that day, we, too, need to raise our voices over the din to become truth-tellers to our communities. Peter’s first sermon is about *us* here and now.

“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.”

Those words are meant for us. God’s Holy Spirit is gifted to us, today. We are called to prophesy. And what we say matters. We cannot speak of God’s love for the world without calling out the powers and systems that oppress. We cannot speak of God’s love for the world without examining the ways in which we as individuals have been guilty of prejudice or discrimination. God’s love is about freedom and the gift of speech allows us to speak of that freedom to whomever might listen.

So in the midst of real cacophony — of news channels with political pundits yelling over each other and Facebook echo chambers, how will you use the Holy Spirit’s gift of speech to share God’s liberating love with the world? How will you ensure that the realm of God expands horizontally, so that it reaches as many people as possible? What will your message be?

For me and my Holy Spirit-inspired message, I am deeply disturbed by the events of this week — from the death of George Floyd, the confrontation in Central Park, and the uprisings in many of our cities. I am disturbed, and I know that the Holy Spirit is calling me to be a truth-teller. But before I use the gift of speech, I am going to educate myself. (After all, perhaps this was the reason the apostles weren’t preaching from the get-go. Perhaps some education was needed first so that they didn’t use the gift of speech in inappropriate or unintended ways.)

Education is key. I am going to use the gift of God’s diversity in the world to educate myself. I am going to educate myself on perspectives that are new to me because of my race. I’m going to read opinion pieces, essays, and poetry by people of color. I’m going to listen to my colleagues and friends who are living and working in America as people of color.

I’m going to educate myself and then I will use the gift of speech to speak of what I’ve learned and how I see it fitting in with God’s plan for the world.

Because this…what we’ve seen this week…is *not* God’s plan for the world. If that first Pentecost was about extending the realm of God to include everyone, it is clear that we are currently failing to do our part in that. But, with the Holy Spirit’s help, I trust that we can discern how the Spirit is guiding us to raise our voices in support and in protest, so that *all* might know and experience God’s love which will always seek to bring people together, and never to divide.

How is the Holy Spirit giving you the gift of speech? For what issue is the Holy Spirit prompting you to speak out against? Where do you find your passion these days? Where do you feel your heart breaking?

On this Pentecost Sunday, definitely take time to celebrate. Celebrate the many wonderful things the Church has done throughout the last 2000 years and that it continues to do. Celebrate all the amazing things that God has done and continues to do for us. Wear red. Sing with gusto. Eat tasty cake. But also, on this Pentecost Sunday, may we pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit to be poured out upon us, to give us discernment in how God is calling us to be citizens of God’s kingdom in this world, and the courage to do so.

And when our voices our raised to cry out for justice, that sound will not be a cacophony. It will be euphony. Mellifluous. Harmonious. *Good.*

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. Jana Childers; Feasting on the Word [↑](#footnote-ref-2)