***WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Text: Acts 2:1-21

*Amazed, perplexed, astonished, bewildered, skeptical*. Those are the words used by Luke to describe the variety of reactions to the coming of the Spirit upon the disciples at Pentecost 2,000 years ago. No one was sure what to make of it, or what to do about it, for it was unlike anything any of them had ever experienced. Behind closed doors the fearful disciples were touched by the Holy Spirit with tongues like fire and the roaring sound of a derecho. From behind those closed doors the spirit-filled disciples burst out into the street to share the good news of the power of God at work in the crucified and risen Lord who had come to save God’s people; they did so in a multitude of languages that they had never before spoken, but which the people understood. And from all corners – from disciples and folks in the street and casual observers – the same stunned question arose: *What does this mean?*

*Angry, appalled, bewildered, heartsick, skeptical.* Those are the words that have been repeated again and again over the last few weeks to describe the variety of reactions to the mass shootings in Buffalo, NY and Uvalde, TX and Tulsa, OK. Before the bodies of victims had been laid to rest in one place, more victims were created in another. In less than two weeks since the shootings at the elementary school in Uvalde that claimed the lives of 19 children and 2 teachers, there have been at least ten shootings in our nation that killed or injured four or more people, more than 200 such shootings in 2022 so far,[[1]](#endnote-1) and two more yesterday killing one and injuring 12. We might think that like the crowd at Pentecost, no one has seen or experienced anything like this before, but we cannot say that, for we have been at this tragic place again and again over the years with shootings at Columbine, CO and an Amish school house in PA and Sandy Hook Elementary School and Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School and Emanuel AME Church in Charleston and Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and the Pulse night club in Orlando. If the message at Pentecost was about a savior’s life in the face of death, the news from these shootings has been about violent death brought to vibrant lives illustrated by the faces of young victims. Perhaps the question in these shootings is akin to that at Pentecost: *What does this mean?* And then its corollary: *Where do we go from here?*

The skeptics at Pentecost suggested that what the events of that day meant was that the disciples were drunk; their solution was to tell the disciples to sober up. For those skeptics it was a one-time event that would quickly pass. But Peter rejected that claim outright and offered a different explanation for what was happening; it was an event of biblical proportions and religious significance. This was the coming of God’s Spirit as the prophet Joel had prophesied. This was a holy event they were witnessing, an act of God they were experiencing. It meant that God was present among them in a new way, an ongoing way that Jesus had promised before his ascension. This was continuing evidence of the power of God at work in their midst, power that had raised the crucified Jesus and now would stir the hearts of God’s people in that place. As a result of their experience on that Pentecost day, about 3,000 people were baptized and welcomed into the community of believers where, according to Luke, “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*.”

Skeptics in these mass shootings have also been quick to judge these events as aberrations that will quickly pass, the unanticipated acts of evil individuals. “*No way to prevent this*,” has been a repeated refrain. And yet that same refrain has been repeated again and again and again across the years and across these last weeks in our nation. As a headline in one satirical magazine put it, “*No way to prevent this,” Says Only Nation Where This Regularly Happens*”.[[2]](#endnote-2) Other nations seem to have figured this out. We alone struggle with it, and if insanity is doing the same thing again and again and expecting a different result, then perhaps we are insane, for we have done little to bring about any change in this pattern of tragic gun violence.

But if this pandemic of mass shootings does not mean what the skeptics suggest, then what does it mean? Perhaps it means that we must come to grips with our national obsession with guns – in theological terms, our idolatry of guns – which leaves us alone in the world at risk for such mass shootings on a recurring basis. Perhaps it means limiting the killing capacity of these weapons. Perhaps it means finding ways to intervene earlier in the lives of troubled individuals who show signs of violent outbursts. Perhaps it means that we take more seriously our responsibility to care for the last and the least, including our children. Perhaps it means coming to terms with the racism that has been the motivating force for many of the shootings. Perhaps it means all of those things and more, but it does not mean arming all of us to the teeth in the hopes of minimizing future disasters.

It is hard to imagine Jesus who said, “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” and “turn the other cheek” and forbade his own disciples from taking up arms against those who came to arrest him, directing us to weaponize every aspect of our lives. I don’t know what the right answer is, but I do know this: we are called to find a different way to address these issues – a way that rejects the world’s rush to violence as a deterrent to violence and embraces Jesus’ teachings about love, a way that honors the crucified and risen Lord of whom those disciples in the streets of Jerusalem spoke in varied tongues.

After their preaching in those Jerusalem streets and welcoming into the Christian community those who believed their message, the disciples faced that daunting question: *Where do we go from here?* Was Pentecost the last hurrah or the beginning of something new? Today we gather far removed from the place and time of the events of that Pentecost day to say that what happened there was something new and significant and holy. What happened there was the birth of a church that has grown from a small group of disciples huddled behind closed doors in Jerusalem into a worldwide community of believers who follow the risen Lord. Today the good news is still proclaimed in a variety of languages – far more than were spoken in Jerusalem that day – but the speakers are now speaking in their native tongues. This growth is not the result of adept organization and planning by the disciples; this is the work of the Spirit who blew through the lives of the people at Pentecost and still stirs our lives as God’s people today.

There is a church in Philadelphia that has beautiful stained-glass windows on one side of the sanctuary depicting saints of years gone by. On the other side of the sanctuary are stained-glass windows depicting the New Jerusalem. Each week the congregation, literally and figuratively, stands and passes through the space between those saints and the New Jerusalem.[[3]](#endnote-3) That is where we stand and serve as well – between the church established by the saints of centuries past and nurtured by the saints of this congregation, the church given birth in Jerusalem at Pentecost, and the New Jerusalem that God has promised will surely come. It is God’s Spirit that birthed the church and that same Spirit that guides and sustains us in this place and time between those saints of old and the New Jerusalem to come, helping us to discern where God would have us go and what God would have us do and who God would have us be as God’s church in the here and now.

For confirmands joining the church today that means, as Barbara Brown Taylor so well puts it, that the *“…church is not a stopping place but a starting place for discerning God’s presence in the world*.”[[4]](#endnote-4) The church is not a destination that marks the end of our journey of faith; it is the community with whom we journey as God’s people, inspired by God’s Spirit, and seeking to be faithful to God’s call. There may be great “aha” moments for us here and there as there were for the disciples at Pentecost, but there will be even more gentle nudgings and encouragement and guidance in the decisions we make day to day about how to be faithful disciples of Jesus. That is true not only for our confirmands, but for all of us!

Which brings us back to the challenges facing us as Christians amid the tragedies of these mass shootings. *Where do we go from here?* We are called to do more than pass along our thoughts and prayers, though those have value too. We are called to respond as faithful followers of Jesus, to work for real change that cherishes each person as created in the image of God and rejects violence as a solution to the violence. As Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, writes:

*To turn the Spirit into the consuming fire of violence is to deny the essential and unchanging nature of God’s work.[[5]](#endnote-5)*

For, the nature of that work is love! The Spirit working in our midst is that same Spirit that appeared as tongues of fire and a rushing wind, sending the disciples out, not to conquer the world and overthrow the Romans, but to share with the world the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. May that same Spirit inspire us to respond faithfully and boldly and bravely and lovingly to the crises of this day and the days to come until we live in that New Jerusalem depicted in those stained-glass windows where “*death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. For God himself will be with them and will wipe every tear from their eyes!*” Amen

1. Timothy Bella and Susan Berger, “Grim Stretch of U.S. Shootings Continues at a Midwest Church and a Funeral”, *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2022, p.A4 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The Onion [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Beverly Zink-Sawyer in sermon at Sprunt lectures 1/30/96 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2006, p.165 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Rowan Williams, *Christ On Trial*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publsihing:2000, p.104 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)