

“Come, Holy Spirit”

Sermon from Acts 2:1-18

Given Pentecost Sunday, June 5, 2022

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

Reverend Erika Marksbury, Senior Pastor

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they all met in one room. Suddenly they heard what sounded like a violent, rushing wind from Heaven; the noise filled the entire house in which they were sitting. Something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each one. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as she enabled them.

Now there were devout people living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven, and at this sound they all assembled. But they were bewildered to hear their native languages being spoken. They were amazed and astonished: “Surely all of these people speaking are Galileans! How does it happen that each of us hears these words in our native tongue? We are Parthians, Medes and Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya around Cyrene, as well as visitors from Rome – all Jews, or convert to Judaism – Cretans and Arabs too; we hear them preaching each in our own language about the marvels of God!”

All were amazed and disturbed. They asked each other, “What does this mean?” But others said mockingly, “They've drunk too much new wine.” Then Peter stood up with the eleven and addressed the crowd: “Women and men of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem! Listen to what I have to say! These people are not drunk as you think – it's only 9 o'clock in the morning!

No, it's what the prophet Joel spoke of: 'In the days to come – it is our God who speaks – I will pour out my spirit on all humankind. Your daughters and sons will prophesy, your young people will see visions, and your elders will dream dreams. Even on the most insignificant of my people, both women and men, I will pour out my spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.'

We have a reader board, you may have noticed, that faces the busiest street in town. This is a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing because it means we have access to the community. We can advertise an event or we can, like what's up there now, wish the graduates well, or we can put up some quote or scripture we hope will inspire those passing by.

After Easter, we let the words of Frederick Buechener have that space for a while - Buechener said, "Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing." I like that quote. It is helpful to me to remember it. I thought it might be a way of thinking about Easter that makes sense to people even outside the church. It stayed up for several weeks. Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing.

And then so many worst things happened. And in my anger after hearing yet another news story about yet another mass shooting, another attack on a black community, that one in New York, I thought about this church's commitment to peace and to anti-racist work, and I scrawled out a new idea for a reader board sign, and I passed it on to Ron, who gathered the letters and

climbed his ladder and changed the resurrection quote to read: thoughts and prayers and dismantle white supremacy.

The thing about the reader board is, of course, there is limited space. There is a finite combination of letters. With infinite space and letters, I would've said "thoughts and prayers and letters and songs and potlucks and marches and meetings and mercy and please, God help us dismantle white supremacy." But I did what I could in the space allotted.

And some people applauded. Some people said, "yeah, yeah, this is why I go to church here." And some people were really offended. Two people - strangers - were offended enough to contact me about it. One over the phone, one over email. They said they were personally offended. They said they knew other people were offended. They said we shouldn't be using our readerboard to divide the community, to promote lies, to spread hate.

To both of them, one over the phone and one over email, I said, "I think this probably isn't the best way to have this discussion. Would you be willing to come in and talk with me about this, maybe over a cup of tea?"

They both said yes.

I scheduled them one right after the other.

And I was feeling pretty good - like, this is what we need these days: to engage in real discussion with people with whom we disagree. To sit down with them in the same room. To share hospitality and find common ground and come to understand each other's humanity, so that we might become more than caricatures to each other.

I was sharing this with a friend before the meetings, and she said, "What's your plan?" And I said, "What do you mean?" And she said, "What will you say to help them understand where you were coming from? What do you think would make it make sense to them?"

And I told her I thought if I could tell them that this church's commitment to justice is rooted in scripture, it's what we read in the life of Jesus, it's one of the ways we imagine ourselves participating in God's dream for the world where all can flourish - I told her if I could say that, I thought they would understand. But I told her that first, I just wanted to listen to them, to hear their stories, to know, really, where their opposition came from, because maybe they just needed to talk something through. That was the extent of my plan: to listen, and to talk about scripture.

It was a flawed plan.

I had failed to take into account that we'd be speaking different languages.

To anyone eavesdropping on that first conversation, it wouldn't have sounded like that was the case. He and I were each animated, passionate, so convinced of our own righteousness. I could've given up the sign, that wasn't the issue, but the ideas on the sign - the idea that racist violence is a real problem in our country - I wasn't about to budge on that, and he held fast to his conviction that I was ignorant, that I had been duped, that my news sources are biased and have a destructive agenda, and now I was doing real damage by perpetuating the lies that I had believed.

We could not hear each other.

I want to say I tried. I believe he tried. But there was no sense-making between us.

While we were meeting, I longed for God's Spirit to come into my office, to have a seat in that third chair, to mediate between us, to translate us for each other. I longed for God's Spirit to break us open for one another, to lay between us a common thread, a small shared hope, some piece we could grab on to and say, "Oh! Here it is! Here's a place we might connect."

I longed for God's Spirit to break down the walls that were building between us, higher and higher, the longer the conversation continued. I longed for God's Spirit to come even just to me, to soften my heart, to help me understand him, even if he wouldn't understand me. I longed for God's Spirit to swoop in

with compassion. I didn't just long for it, I prayed for it, silently, as we sat together.

It didn't happen.

When we had set up the appointment, before we'd hung up the phone, I told him, "I want to thank you for saying yes to this invitation. I get the feeling from what we've each shared so far that there's probably a lot we disagree on. But I think this is what we have to do as neighbors: come together and talk, even though we disagree, and see where we can connect in spite of that. So thank you."

And he said, "Of course!" He said, "What kind of person would I be if I was just angry, or talked about it behind your back, but wasn't willing to really talk with you about it?" And I thought, but didn't say out loud: you'd be like so many other people. You'd be like me, so many other times.

So I had some hope, going in. And the longer we talked, the more my hope dissipated, until at the end he stood up to leave, and I did, too, and I didn't feel like I had made a friend. And I didn't feel like I had gained a new understanding. I didn't feel like this was the beginning of what might one day be a constructive dialogue. And I didn't feel like we were one in the Spirit.

I'd wanted to. I know that sometimes that can happen. But it didn't happen that time.

And he left, and she came in, my next appointment, set up for the same reason; she came in, and she sat across from me, and I didn't say anything for a while, and she looked around, and she set her purse down, and finally she said, "I'm not really sure why I'm here. I think I just wanted to share my heart with you."

And I felt a new wind blow through.

For an hour we spoke different languages to one another - she was an older woman, raised on a farm, her native tongue that of conservative, literal-leaning Christianity. I'm as old as I am, raised in the suburbs, fluent these days in a more progressive language, a more symbolic reading of the stories of our faith. But we could understand one another. We could hear the differences but somehow they seemed to make sense to both of us. We spoke of hurt and pain and hope and promise and it was a kind of communion and I know it was not my gifts that made that possible.

I don't know how or why it happened. I don't know if my prayer was answered, just a little later than I'd been asking it. I don't know if my pride stepped aside for that conversation. I don't know if it was something in her heart, or mine, or if it was all of that. I just know that at the end, she invited me over for chicken and dumplings and I liked her so much I didn't have the heart to tell her I've been vegetarian for thirty years. We'll figure out words for that when we need to.

In Advent, we say that we tell the story of Jesus' birth every year because it doesn't happen just once that God comes to be born among us - it happens in every time, in every place, that we nurture new hope, that we cultivate new peace, that we celebrate new joy, that we tend to new love.

Pentecost is the same. God's Spirit doesn't just come to the disciples in that room in Jerusalem long ago. It offers itself to us in any wind that sweeps through with energy, imagination, understanding. The energy weaves us together. The imagination calls us into a shared future. The understanding helps us get there together. We sing, "Come, Living Spirit" not in some historical memory but in a right-now plea: we need that power again. We need one another, and we sometimes can't get there on our own. I, at least, sometimes can't get there on my own.

What if today, we prayed for the Spirit to come to us and enable us to speak in new ways, so that we might hear and understand one another, so that we also might be heard and understood?

What if we prayed for tongues of healing, that our words would ease hurt, would soothe wounds, would bind up the brokenhearted?

What if we prayed for tongues of peace, that our words might reconcile enemies, might help us imagine new ways of flourishing, might set the oppressed free?

What if we prayed for tongues of courage, that our words would tell hard truths, would challenge injustice, would be good news to the poor?

What if we prayed for tongues of compassion, that our words would draw us closer to one another, would help us find common ground, would let each person who hears us know themselves as our kin, and as God's beloved?

I don't know why sometimes prayers are answered and sometimes they're not, at least in the moment that we speak them. But I would invite you to join me in saying again, in your heart, as I'm saying in mine:

Come, Holy Spirit, so that we might speak, so that we might listen, to you, and to each other, and to our world.

Amen.