



Sunday, May 31, 2020
Easter Sermon Series: We're All in This Together

We're All in This Together
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Acts 2:1-8, 14, 16-21 NLT

On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. ²Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. ³Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. ⁴And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

⁵At that time there were devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem. ⁶When they heard the loud noise, everyone came running, and they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers. ⁷They were completely amazed. "How can this be?" they exclaimed. "These people are all from Galilee, ⁸and yet we hear them speaking in our own native languages!"

¹⁴Then Peter stepped forward with the eleven other apostles and shouted to the crowd, "Listen carefully, all of you, fellow Jews and residents of Jerusalem! Make no mistake about this.

¹⁶"What you see was predicted long ago by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷'In the last days,' God says, 'I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on my servants—men and women alike—and they will prophesy. ¹⁹And I will cause wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below—blood and fire and clouds of smoke. ²⁰The sun will become dark, and the moon will turn blood red before that great and glorious day of the Lord arrives. ²¹But everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' "

What kind of world are we living in? For the past 3 months we've been experiencing a deadly virus known as COVID-19. It's turned our familiar, mostly-orderly world upside down - schools closed, businesses closed, churches closed, and lots of people spending lots of time at home.

What kind of world are we living in? For the past 6 days we've watched angry protests and riots, looting and burning on the streets of Minneapolis. Our familiar, mostly-orderly world has been turned upside down again. A black man, George Floyd, died in the custody of a white police officer who dug his knee into Floyd's

neck. We've seen the video countless times. We've heard Floyd's tragic cry, "I can't breathe." The actions have been widely condemned. The four officers involved have been fired. And yet accountability and justice can be painfully slow. Dr. Martin Luther King once described riots as the "language of the unheard."

What kind of world are we living in? How do we know the right things to do in our upside-down world? Do we wear masks when we're out in public? Do we keep 6 feet apart from others? Do we wash our hands regularly? Do we join the protests? Do we fight for justice? Do we listen as carefully as possible to those who've been feeling unheard?

I don't have answers to all these questions - many of them are deeply personal - but I think they're worthy of further conversation. Even though the stories behind them are vastly different, I see some similarities with the Pentecost story. On the Jewish festival of Pentecost, the early followers of Jesus were gathered in a house. Their familiar, mostly-orderly world had been turned upside down too, by the events of Good Friday and Easter.

What should we do next, they wondered, should we just give up and go home? Suddenly there was a strange stirring in the heavens. It was like the roar of a mighty windstorm. There were flames of fire around them. And then, in the midst of all the commotion, those who had gathered from far and wide were able to hear, in their own languages, that God was up to something new. That new thing was nothing less than the Holy Spirit being poured out on all people - young and old; men and women; slave and free; red and yellow, black and white.

It's easy to get caught up in the extraordinary details of Pentecost - wind and fire and a cacophony of languages. Yet I wonder if there might be a few more-down-to-earth lessons for us to consider. I think so. And so, mindful especially of our high school graduates - I know how much you've been missing school - I want to hold up three Pentecost lessons today. Don't worry, they won't be on the final exam, but they're important for living our lives.

A first lesson of Pentecost: the Holy Spirit doesn't come to solve all our problems; sometimes the Spirit creates more of them. Think about it. Without the coming of the Spirit, the disciples would have packed up and headed home. They were fishermen by trade. I can almost hear James and John explaining it: "Sure, it was a wild and crazy three-year-ride, and that Jesus sure was a great guy, but now it's time to tend to old dad's fishing business."

The disciples weren't so different from us. In the midst of all the disruption, they wanted things to get back to *normal* again: holiday picnics, haircuts, fishing out on the lake. But here's the deal: once the Spirit arrived, a return to normal was not really an option. They could only go forward, not back. Soon they'd be sent on a mission with an unlikely message: "God has redeemed you through a traveling preacher from the backwaters of Galilee who ended up on a cross. He wants to change your life!"

David Brooks of the New York Times challenges high school and college graduates to leave behind the American obsession with self-fulfillment. Instead, says Brooks, how about finding yourself in service to others? And how do you do this? By

making sacred commitments; by rising to the challenges you discover all around you. “Most successful young people,” Brooks writes, “don’t look inside and then plan a life. They look outside and find a problem, which summons their life. And in that summons they hopefully find a calling.”

This is not only true for graduates; it’s true for churches too. No carefully crafted mission statement or long-term planning process can ever substitute for looking around the neighborhood and asking, “Who needs us? What can we do with our resources to bear God’s love to our little corner of the world?” That’s the prompting of the Spirit: not solving all our problems, but often creating more of them.

A second lesson from Pentecost: *the Spirit doesn’t guarantee success; rather it nudges us to try and sometimes even to fail in our efforts.* Yesterday’s launch of SpaceX reminded me of the Apollo 13 launch fifty years ago. I remember the 1995 movie more than the launch itself, and there was trouble along the way. Astronauts were heading to the moon. They’ left the earth’s orbit. Everything was going according to plan. Suddenly we heard, “Houston, we have a problem.” An oxygen tank had exploded and all sorts of complications arose. The lunar landing had to be scrapped. Command central and the astronauts had to scramble to find another way home. Perhaps you remember the famous line from flight director Gene Kranz: “Failure is not an option.”

That’s a great line for a movie, but it can be terribly hard in real life. Living in a world obsessed by success, we can end up paralyzed. We need a more gracious view. An English teacher once said: “I tell my kids to make a mistake every day – just not the same mistake.” Said the teacher: “Each mistake, each set back, each failure is not to be lamented but to be learned from.”

Consider this: How many vaccines will we need to try, how many experiments will we need to run, how many false leads will we need to track down...on the way to combatting the Coronavirus? And beyond that, how many black men and women will need to die, how many protests will need to be organized, how many cries of despair will need to be raised...before we can actually embrace our differences and be grateful for them?

Will there be failure along the way? Sure there will. The problems we face are much too complex to imagine that we will hit upon the best solution the first time out...or maybe ever. Once we’ve identified a worthy challenge, we must experiment...and count on failing; and then innovate...and count on failing again.

The same goes for churches. In a day and age when many aren’t sure if they see themselves as Christian or not, we might as well admit it: most churches are in decline. We’re doing our best. We’re experimenting with new things. We’re making this up as we go.

In such a climate, failure is not only an option, it’s inevitable. More than ever we need to remember that it’s not all up to us. God is the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of the world, and only God can bring the kind of redemption we long for and need. Our job is to partner with God’s work, wherever we can discern it. If the cross teaches us nothing else, it teaches that success will not always look like success. That’s the

fresh wind of the Spirit: not guaranteeing success, but always nudging us to try and be willing to fail. The question is not whether we're successful, but whether we're faithful.

A third lesson from Pentecost: *the real gift of this day is not the glitz and the glamor - the wind and the fire - it's the gift of having something worthwhile to say.* For the early believers, the day felt like a lost cause. Then Peter the preacher stood up and shared a word from the prophet Joel: "In the latter days, I will pour out my Spirit on all humanity. And your sons and daughters will prophesy." They will have a word to speak: love is stronger than hate, hope is deeper than despair; life is stronger than death.

When Elizabeth Kubler Ross was writing her famous book on death and dying, her research involved interviewing dying patients in the hospital. She was studying how they felt about death as it approached. When Dr. Ross went from room to room, she began to notice a pattern. Sometimes she would go into the dying person's room, and that person would be calm and at peace. She also noticed this was often the case when a certain orderly had cleaned that room. One day, Dr. Ross bumped into the orderly in the hall, and she asked her, "What are you doing with my patients?"

The orderly thought she was being reprimanded, and so replied, "I'm not doing anything with your patients."

"No, No," responded the doctor. "It's a good thing. After you go into the rooms, they seem at peace. What are you doing with my patients?"

"I just talk to them," said the orderly. "I've had two babies of my own die on my lap. But God never abandoned me. I tell them that. I tell them they're not alone, God is with them, and they don't have to be afraid."

That's the gift of Pentecost: having something worthwhile to say. We have a word to speak to the brokenness and tragedy of our world, a word of hope that's unlike any other. And let's be honest it's a word we need to hear just as much as others do.

What kind of world are we living in? A world that's been turned upside down. A world of disruption, discouragement, and despair. We so want things to get back to normal again. That's the hard part. We don't know exactly what normal will be, and when it will come. Like those early Christians after Pentecost, there's no going back, only forward.

This afternoon I'll be heading to the Twin Cities. I own a home about two miles from the epicenter of this past week's violence and destruction. As far as I know, the protests and riots have not come near my neighborhood, but I know well the places that have been affected, and I grieve for them. Truth be told, I'm a lot more comfortable with peaceful protests than with violent ones. Even as I say this, however, I readily admit that much of my perspective has been shaped by my privilege. I can't fully appreciate Dr. King's' description of riots as the language of the unheard...because it feels like I've always been heard. As I'm driving into town, I'll be

praying: *Lord, help me to see...and hear...and better understand those who are different from me. Our world so needs it!*

People of Pentecost, what kind of world are we living in? Are you ready to head out into that world and make your mark? I hope so. As you do, please remember: 1) God's Spirit goes with you, not to solve all your problems, but often to create new ones. 2) God's Spirit goes with you, not to guarantee success, but to nudge you to keep trying and even be willing to sometimes fail. 3) God's Spirit goes with you, and gives you something worthwhile to say: God has not abandoned us. Love is stronger than hate, hope is deeper than despair, life is stronger than death.

Friends, we are all in this together. We need to be! With God's help, it's the only way we're ever going to make it! Amen.