

The Rev. Kristin P. R. Wickersham
"Listening Spirit"
A Sermon for St. Peter's Parish Church
The Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday. Year A.
May 31, 2020

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples 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.' "*

John 20:19-23

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Today is the feast of Pentecost, one of the seven major feast days of the church year. Pentecost ranks right up there with Christmas and Easter in terms of importance, even though we don't make a secular and economic holiday out of it. It's a day on which we typically hold baptisms, robing our newly baptized members in white robes, which is why it's sometimes called Whitsunday, which comes from white Sunday, which comes from all those white robes. We

would've been baptizing Livia Lane Jones, Matthew and Shelly's daughter today. Baptisms, like Eucharist, will have to wait for the future. We wait out of love, and we wait with hope. Today is also sometimes called the birth day of the church. Both the reading from Acts and the reading from John tell us the Pentecost story – even though they're different. In both, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus disciples, empowering them for their work in the world. John is explicit in connecting the Peace of Christ with his sending us out into the world. John also directly connects the Holy Spirit to breath.

Breath is vital for life. God's breath is what brought Adam to life in Genesis. And the wind of God, the breath of God, is what hovered over the waters in Genesis when the earth was formless and empty, while darkness was over the surface of the deep. Breath, wind, the movement of the Spirit is foundational to the world, to our life as God's creatures, and to the life of the church. The knowledge about the sacredness of breath and life is what has made the last few days so difficult for many Christians. The image of George Floyd's death is seared into my mind because of that knowledge. What happened to him was deeply sinful, and evil, because it goes against everything that God does in the world. It goes against creation, the sacredness of life, and the gift of God's breath and enlivening Spirit. It's also evil because it is an inhuman act, cruel and barbaric, and, I wish to think, deeply against what I hope are the human characteristics of compassion and mercy. It was an act of malice and evil.

Racism is evil. I hope we all know that. But I think we don't always know what racism means. I used to think I wasn't racist. Frankly, when someone uses the word, I become immediately anxious. I think it also makes a lot of people quite defensive. When I talk to white people about racism, I almost immediately hear people saying, "I'm not racist. I have a black friend, (or black friends,) who I like a lot." Or, "I'm not racist, I have an adopted black grandchild." Or "I'm not racist, I work with a lot of black people and I treat them very well." As we talk about racism, I'd like to read to you something written during the Civil Rights era by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., because sadly I believe it still applies. Listen to his words.

"Certain conditions continue to exist in our society, which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality and humanity. And so in a real sense our nation's summers of riots are caused by our nation's winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again. Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention."

I used to think racism didn't apply to me, because I'm a "good" person. But then, through the power of the Holy Spirit, I learned something about my fellow human beings and myself. I learned by listening. Some of you have asked me what can be done in the face of such an intractable problem for this country. Racism has existed here since our founding, because the foundations of our country are intertwined with slavery. If you want to heal the brokenness that we're experiencing, I urge each of you, myself included, to start with putting aside feelings that

racism somehow means someone is a “bad” person. I also urge you to be aware of the defensiveness and anxiety that arise in us when we hear the word racist. I urge you to start with listening.

Several years ago, I participated in an ecumenical group studying the theology of the Rev. Dr. King. There were about 30 of us. We ranged in age from 20 to 80. Some were ordained, others not. There were Presbyterians, Baptists, a Buddhist, several Methodists, one of the Brethren, and me. About half of us were black, and half were white. There was one Asian person, and one who identified as mixed-race. We spent two weeks listening to each other. Our class was intense. Five hours each day, every day for two weeks. I witness to you that this was difficult work. It was hard and awkward. I felt defensive many times. My black brothers and sisters often felt frustrated, even angry, as they spoke openly about their lives. Everyone in that room was a well-educated, devoted Christian (yes, except for the one Buddhist, but you get the idea). Over the days we listened to each other, and I hope we softened. As we got to know each other, our hearts opened to the Spirit.

You could feel the Holy Spirit working. The breaths we took in, either to begin talking to each other or to keep ourselves from talking when we shouldn't, were all filled with the creative energy of God, hovering over our chaos. As the days went on the stories poured out. Good people told about encounter after encounter. A white classmate told of the time he went to the grocery store. He had forgotten his credit card and simply told the cashier the card number. He was immediately rung up and his transaction completed. The black woman who came after him in the line was asked by the cashier to show her credit card to him because the cashier wanted to check that her signature matched the one on the back of the card. A good friend of mine, an older black man who owned a string of pharmacies in Richmond was driving his Lexus through The Fan when he was pulled over, ostensibly because the police officer thought he'd seen something dangling from the rear-view mirror of the car. The saddest part of that story is that the black man had just come out of a restaurant in The Fan, where he had spontaneously paid for the lunch of the four police officers sitting at a nearby table. It was one of those officers who pulled him over. They worked it out.

I hope that we all learn to stop talking and start listening to our black brothers and sisters. I don't always do it well, so if you're concerned about that, I can tell you that you'll learn to get over it. We can recognize our anxieties and our fears, which prevent us from listening, and sometimes even prevent us from engaging. I am blessed with black friends who will talk to me honestly. I hope that you are, too. If not, start there.

When the Spirit acts, each of us who speak a different language will begin to hear the language of God. Healing begins with understanding. Understanding begins with an open heart. We may begin by feeling bewildered. We may feel awkward, vulnerable, or even defensive. It's okay. We all need to begin. We need to begin, not by talking, but by listening and tuning in to the work of the Spirit around us. Through the Spirit, each will begin to understand in our own native languages. We'll hear the stories of our brothers and sisters through our own lenses of socio-economic status and culture, in words that we can understand. Virginians, Texans, Floridians, people from Michigan and Illinois. Politicians in Washington, people from Williamsburg, Richmond, New Kent and other areas of rural Virginia. Each of us has a different life and a

different experience. Each of us sees God from different perspectives. But here's the thing to hold on to. Each of us, no matter our differences, no matter the melanin content of our skin, no matter our backgrounds or the sins we may have committed, is equally loved by God. Equally. And we each bear the image of God on our souls. Search for that image in each other, even others that you're afraid of, don't understand, or are angry at for whatever reason. It's easier to see the image of God in people we like and in people who look like us. Remember that it's there in all of us. Live into it with a listening heart of patience. Live into it longing to understand, rather than to be understood. Live into it with deep humility.

Alongside that powerful, violent wind of the Spirit come tongues, as of fire, resting on each of Jesus' disciples. Cleansing flame to burn away impurities and leave us in ash to be reborn again. Reborn in the Spirit. Come Holy Spirit. Come.

Amen.