Instead of a Party

A meditation on Acts 2: 1 – 21 and Numbers 11: 24 – 30

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Virtual Grace Presbyterian Church May 31, 2020

Sometimes parties must be canceled. The weather doesn’t cooperate, or the guest of honor gets sick. Or a pandemic hits. Or your look around you and see so much grief, that you are forced to ask, how can we eat cake and sing songs when our siblings are wracked with anger and grief? How can we celebrate the flames of the Spirit that danced over the disciples’ heads, when our cities have erupted in flame? How do we celebrate new life, rebirth, the very birth of the church itself, while standing in the midst of what now feels like an ever-spreading cemetery filled with victims of racial discrimination?

At the very heart of Pentecost is the revelation that God’s Spirit, God’s breath is given to all people, people of every color, every place, every age. God’s breath, a mighty wind that inspires, ignites, compels, enlivens, and as Jesus prays: unites us. The gift of God’s breath is what we gather to celebrate, yet, this week, we heard a man, George Floyd, cry out, over and over, *“I can’t breathe.”* And we are reminded of Eric Garner, who cried the same words in 2014 in NYC, and we are reminded of every black man or woman who longed for breath as they were being lynched, and every enslaved person, treated like cargo, who suffocated in the bowels of a ship as they were torn from their homes. And we must ask how close we who are white have come to suffocating the Spirit itself by our abuses of people of color. How much abuse, how much despair can God endure? We can try to cover our ears, but the Spirit will still say to us, “whatever you do to your sibling, you do to Me.”

Maybe we’ve gone about this Pentecost thing all wrong. We’ve been calling it the church’s birthday and sometimes we have a party to celebrate, but if it is a party, it is a party that was taken to the streets. Remember what happened? A rush of wind that filled the house, pushing the apostles out into the city of Jerusalem. It was not a private gathering. The Spirit had no intention of allowing them to keep this to themselves. We need to move beyond the idea of Pentecost as the church’s birthday party and instead consider it to be the *church’s peaceful witness – peaceful protest -to the world.* The Pentecost protest reminds us to celebrate diversity *rather than* fear it. The Pentecost protest is a counter narrative to the voices that tell us to isolate, to seek out our own kind. Our God is a God of disruption, and God will continue to uproot our fear and disrupt our complacency until we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

If you want to have a dinner party and make everyone uncomfortable, invite Jesus. He will bring someone along who you didn’t invite, whom you would prefer to avoid, and he will make sure you sit together. You won’t be able to dig into the feast without realizing that there are hungry people in the next neighborhood, and so you will find yourself packing up a portion of the food, and all of the dessert, to deliver on your way home. You won’t be able to share the wine, without remembering the hands that picked the grapes and the feet that stomped them. You will have a sudden desire to know if they were paid fairly for their labor.

Jesus’ presence is a disruption to our comfort. Jesus’ presence IS a countercultural protest.

So don’t start complaining about protests and protestors. As Jim Coppoc writes in *The Theology of Riot* for the *Progressive Christian* website: Jesus protested, Jesus damaged property, Jesus disrupted commerce. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, as the political leaders rode in on majestic horses on the other side of town. His parade was a protest march, a protest against those in power who abuse and neglect the people in their care. His parade was the counterimage, the non-violent protest. From there he went to the Temple and flipped the money changers’ tables. Does this sound like anything we’ve witnessed the last two days? He wasn’t a looter; he was the anti-looter since he didn’t believe in owning material possessions. But if it takes looting to wake us up?? To shake us from our materialism? If you believe that Jesus isn’t in those marching crowds, you probably need to think again. He is the one calling out “I can’t breathe.” He is calling out, “Say his name.” He is calling out “Black lives matter.” And yes, all lives do matter, but all lives aren’t being oppressed: *black lives are.* “These protests,” writes Coppoc, “are not just violence returning physical violence. They are also violence returning economic violence, returning social violence, returning generational spiritual violence.” [[1]](#endnote-1) *Generational spiritual violence*: think about that for a moment…or more.

Maybe this doesn’t fit with your image of a sweet and gentle Jesus, and I’m not trying to take that away from you. I’m sure he was sweet and gentle with children, with the broken-hearted, with any in need of tenderness. But for those who were ready for a difficult word of truth, he offered that, as well. He offered God’s own truth about the way things were and the way God desires them to be. He pointed to the disparity and tried to teach his followers, teach us, how to close that painful gap. As Senator Cory Booker and others have said, where there is racism, we must be “anti-racists.” If there were ever a day in which to celebrate unity in diversity, it is *today.* It is Pentecost. Are we paying attention? The symbols of Pentecost are a disruptive wind, and tongues of fire. The symbols of Pentecost are not rainbows and butterflies, but mighty wind and crackling flame.

On that Pentecost day when the apostles flew into the streets to share the good news of God’s love, the powerful news of Jesus’ life, they encountered diversity, and were unified by it. Each was able to hear in their own language. Barriers that normally would have prevented them from understanding one another? They were gone! That is the Pentecost we need. God pour out your Spirit upon us, that we might be united. Pour out your Spirit that those of us who are white, would be equipped to listen, to hear our neighbor, and understand, and to ACT. Our ears have been closed for far too long. Our feet have been still for far too long, our hands resting at our sides. Our voices have been silent in the face of oppression, and that that is not what God’s people are called to do and to be.

When I think of each of you, think of our community of faith, I give thanks, because I know you are grieved by the pain you are witnessing, and so I want to remind you once again, that you are no different from those disciples who took to the streets on Pentecost. But if you need another image for inspiration, remember the other story about the outpouring of God’s Spirit that we heard this morning. Remember Eldad and Medad. A bone-weary Moses, so tired of listening to the complaints of the Israelites as they wander in the wilderness, begs God for help. Moses is so distraught he wants to die. God instructs him to gather 70 elders so that God can take some of God’s spirit and scatter it over these 70. They will be empowered to share the burden of caring for God’s people. But two of these, Eldad and Medad, who were part of the recruited team, don’t show up. Who knows why? Maybe they felt inadequate, maybe they were afraid. God’s Spirit still finds them. God’s Spirit still falls on them. They prophesy right where they are.

But someone is always unhappy about rule breakers. Joshua needs Moses to know that Eldad and Medad are not doing things correctly. They aren’t in the tent; they are in the camp. Moses doesn’t care. Moses trusts that if God wants Eldad and Medad to bring good news to the people in the camp, then that is God’s business. “More prophets,” says Moses, “that’s a good thing.” God had adapted God’s plan, allowing for the two who weren’t like all the others, and made it an even better plan. God’s spirit fell upon the 68 at the tent *and* the 2 at the camp, and that was as it should be. Eldad and Medad were “getting into good trouble” as Rep. John Lewis would say, as Lewis would encourage us to do.

The disciples on Pentecost got into “good trouble.” Some accused them of being drunk. They were not drunk. They were positively disruptive, bringing a peaceful counternarrative to a world in need. God’s Spirit will find you, even when you huddle within the safety of your home. God’s Spirit will fall upon you, even if you are in the wrong place at the right time. God needs disciples in the streets. God needs prophets in the camp. God needs you to be a witness.

God needs you to remember to look for Jesus on the face of the one you love, on the face of the one you fear, on the face of the one you don’t understand. God needs you to look deeply, to listen carefully, to walk peacefully, and to work intentionally for the renewing of God’s world. Our Brief Statement of Faith contains these words:

“In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, (You can do that from anywhere!) to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior (Do we have a witness?), to unmask idolatries in Church and culture (I know some of you are really good at that!),  to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for  justice, freedom, and peace. (Co-partners with God in the redeeming of the world.)

May this Pentecost inspire us to be the people of peaceful protest, the people who take our faith to the streets in witness and compassion. May God, in all God’s mercy, renew the church with justice, freedom and peace.

Amen and Amen.

1. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thenewparaclete/2020/05/its-not-about-george-floyd/#disqus_thread> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)