

Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2020

“Together, Yet Still Apart.”

The Rev. Christopher W. Keating

A Sermon Preached at Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church

Acts, 2:1-21

*Gathered by the Spirit, the church was given power to speak truth*

Several months before my mother died, she hosted a dinner at her care facility. It was a small dinner—just my brother and his wife, my sister, and Carol and myself. Mom had worked with the care center’s chef to pick the menu—home made pot roast, and roasted vegetables, mashed potatoes, and cherry pie. It was as if she had cooked the meal herself. It was a sacramental moment, a moment when God’s love was revealed for us in new and fresh ways. She looked at each of us, and smiled, and we all knew what she was thinking: it is good to be together.

And it was good to be together. It was good to breathe the same air, to share in the same jokes, to celebrate the blessings of family, to look at each other in the eye and express delight and love for one another. It was especially wonderful that none of us had to set the table or do the dishes! It was a chance to be together, and a sign of God’s grace and peace.

It was good to be together. Luke has something of that in mind, I believe, as he sets the stage for the unleashing of the church’s mission. We talk about Pentecost as the church’s birthday, but it may be more accurate to think of it as the church’s baptism – a moment when the Spirit descended on the apostles and pushed them into the streets.

Luke takes pains to remind us who was gathered there on Pentecost. In chapter one, he takes attendance, calling the roll as if it were the first day of school: Peter? “Here.” John, James, Andrew? “Here.” Philip? “Yo!” Thomas? Bartholomew? Matthew? James? Simon? Judas, not that Judas, but Judas the son of James?”

Yet Luke knows the church is called to include more than just those eleven. He adds to others to the enrollment, making sure to include “some women,” and “Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.” By casting lots, the apostles chose Matthias to take Judas Iscariot’s place, thus proving the early church was neither Baptist nor Presbyterian. There would have been no gambling if they were Baptists, and if they had been Presbyterian, they would have established a nominating committee.

But even this latecomer is not alone. At verse 15 of chapter one Luke adds, “the family of believers was a company of one hundred and twenty persons.” It is a remarkably diverse and inclusive list, devoted to prayer and the study of scripture.

And when the feast of Pentecost arrives, they are still together, in one place.

This is the one part of the Pentecost story which we could always count on. For years, as we have gathered on Pentecost at Woodlawn Chapel, we have always been mindful that it was on Pentecost Sunday in 1990 that the Holy Spirit gave birth to this congregation. Those of you who were there remember the crowds and the tent, the baptisms, the energy. It is our origin story, retold year after year, a wonderful memory of how this congregation was born, gathered together in one place.

We have told the story over barbecue and burgers. We have told it sitting in the field and sitting indoors. We have honored charter members whose faith and prayers made the church a reality, given thanks for the hard work of the founders, and looked at pictures of our much younger selves. Over the years we have been both comforted and challenged by this singular promise: we were together.

This is our story, this is our song: which makes this Pentecost seem surreal. On this day, we are not in one place – and even when we gather for our Parking Lot Parade at 10:30 we shall still be socially distanced.

There will be no rushing flames from heaven or from a barbecue. We are not in one place today, which seems to make it harder to wait for the gift of the Spirit which brings understanding and welcome to people of diverse languages, cultures, and journeys.

This year is a Pentecost like none other in the history of the Christian church. This Sunday we are all together, but not in one place. Even as we look for those divided tongues to bring us together, we know the pandemic has kept us separate. We know that racism and violence keep us divided. We are praying for the Spirit to come – the comforter, the advocate, the One whom Jesus has said will reveal everything we need to know.

Today we join our voices in prayer and praise: “Come, creator Spirit,” even as we grieve the realities which tear us asunder.

It is that prayer which reveals to us the center of what it means to anticipate the warm, enlivening breath of God which brings both comfort and challenge. I have resisted using the term “reopening” the church, mainly because I believe that the church—this one or any other congregation—has never, ever been closed. Nor do I believe that the church shall ever close. Tackling the problem of how we will re-engage our public ministry is not the same as “reopening.” We are apart, but we are still together. The building has remained empty, but our mission has continued. As our Session has said so beautifully in the document they created to guide our re-emergence into public ministry:

*While sheltering at home during this unprecedented time we hold images of Woodlawn members united and celebrating the pandemic's end. We hope for a sanctuary full of laughter and greetings mixed with the comfort of worship. Yet, we know, the return to in-person ministry must be gradual and carefully planned.*

We remain, like those early apostles, sheltered in place, praying for the enlivening power of God. The church is open: we are praying for and with each other. The church is open: we gather to worship. The church is open: we are studying scripture together. The church is open: we are meeting for fellowship. The church is open: we are engaged in serving our community: delivering meals to health care workers, gifts to the mothers of seriously ill children, food to the clients served by Circle of Concern.

We are together in the power of the spirit, and very soon the Spirit will send us out into the streets.

There's a little line from a hymn we often sing, "The Hymn of Promise." Natalie Sleeth, the hymn's author, borrowed a line from a T.S. Eliot poem. "In the end is our beginning," she writes, "in our time, infinity, in our doubt in our doubt there is believing, in our life, eternity. In our death, a resurrection, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."

Sleeth knows that the promise of God's Spirit will lead us into abundant and eternal life. Not only when we died, but here and now.

The Spirit comes as a rushing wind, a reminder that in the Old Testament the word for "Spirit" is wind. In Greek, Spirit is "pneuma," breath. This new breath of God infuses our own bodies and spirit with freshness and power. It gives us, in the words of our Presbyterian Statement of Faith, courage to testify in a broken and sinful world. We are apart, yet we are together, and the breath of God is at work among us.

We are together, even when we are falling apart.

That good news gives us hope, even in the wake of a week of tragic violence and horrifying racism. We who heard George Floyd gasp, "I can't breathe," eagerly await the breath of God which will lead us to confess the sin of racism and pushes us into the world to dismantle racism. The tragedy of Floyd's death is a stabbing reminder of the history of lynching in America, and a reminder of the ways white churches have had the privilege of not speaking out. The protests which have followed are also reminders of toxic, polluted air of sin and violence. The coronavirus is yet another reminder of our inability to breathe, and our fear of breathing the same air as others—and so we pray, "come, Spirit, come." Bring us together, bring us healing, bring us comfort, bring us redemption. Until all of us can breathe, none of us will breathe.

But the good news is the breath of God is coming...with power and full assurance.  
Amen.