

Acts 2:1-21 Pentecost Pastor Bill Uetricht 5/31/20

As I was thinking about this sermon and as I began to write it, we all learned about George Floyd and his death and were hearing about the riots in Minneapolis. All I could think and pray was “Lord, have mercy. Come, Holy Spirit, come! Come you who loves difference! Come, you who unifies all!”

I have said for a long time that one of the big challenges for traditions like the one I have been a part of for my whole life—a tradition that I deeply love, by the way—is our lack of a well-developed view or theology of the Holy Spirit. Because we witness the crazy things that some people do with the Holy Spirit, we sometimes want to not talk about the Spirit. We watch people for whom the Holy Spirit is just another name for their opinions or emotions and we then conclude that maybe we should avoid reference to the Spirit. And besides, the Holy Spirit could mess with our neat little worlds, take us outside of our neat little boxes. The Holy Spirit might even mess with our institutions that we use to establish our worlds and maintain our boxes.

Yes, you are right! If the story from Acts that was just read is any indication, the Holy Spirit is wild. The Holy Spirit is God on the loose.

It was a Jewish party day; Pentecost, they called it, because Pentecost means fifty. The Pentecost party takes place 50 days after Passover. And this party was for the sake of celebrating the Harvest and, at one point in Israel’s history, the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai.

During this party, attended by devout Jews from all kinds of nations, immigrants in other words, the Holy Spirit shows up. And the Spirit’s presence sounds like the rush of violent wind. This sound fills the entire house where the gathered disciples are sitting. And all of a sudden, something that looked like tongues of fire appears among the gathered disciples, eventually resting on each one of them. Then the

disciples begin speaking in other languages--languages not known by them, but known by others.

This would make a great special-effects movie. There is such wildness in this scene. Often, when we think about religion, we think about that which makes life tame. And that's not a bad thought, by the way. Good religion can calm us, focus our attention, get us down to business, take us to better behavior. But don't reach the conclusion that the experience with God is all about neatness and tidiness and tameness. To confront the Spirit is to encounter the wildness of God, the wildness that unsettles us and tears open our neatly wrapped boxes. All of a sudden, the world is a bigger place. All of a sudden, there is a calling to something outside of yourself, something larger than your little group. The Spirit does wild things and takes people to wild places and breaks open the like-minded tribes that we often live within.

Such wildness can be unsettling. Those who are watching the disciples in the Acts story conclude that their wild behavior must be due to too much drinking. They are all drunk, the observers claim. Why else would they be doing such wild things?

Peter responds to their contention: "They are not drunk as you assume; this is what happens when the wild Spirit gets to work. This is what God through the prophet Joel said, 'In the last days, I will pour out my Spirit on *all* flesh; I will pour that Spirit on men and women, slaves and free persons, old men and young men.'" The final days are the days when the Spirit is given democratically to all. At the Pentecost party, the final days have come. God is doing wild things among *all* people. God is not confined to sameness. The Spirit is at work among the amazing diversity of God's people.

If you have reached the conclusion that difference is the problem, then you aren't ready for the wild Spirit of Pentecost. If you need the

same old same old, if you need everybody to look like you or act like you or think like you or vote like you or worship like you, then you better get prepared for the wild Spirit of Pentecost who will rip open the boxes you have created for yourselves; you better get prepared for the wild fire of Pentecost that will burn away your impurities, your preoccupation with yourself and your little club.

The disciples in Acts speak *different* languages than the ones that are their native tongues. Devout Jews from *every* nation are living in Jerusalem and coming to the party. When the Spirit of unity moves, difference or diversity is not spurned or done away with. No, it is embraced. Unity is not sameness.

The Apostle Paul in today's reading from First Corinthians underscores that point by talking about the Spirit as the one who gives diverse gifts. There is only one Spirit, he says. But that Spirit gives unique gifts to all of us. The one Spirit is wildly at work gifting the community of faith with a diversity of gifts. Difference isn't bad. Difference is integral to the well-being of the community. I would urge our graduates to trust this. You have been gifted uniquely. Trust your giftedness, but also trust that others have been gifted uniquely, too. Difference is wonderful and essential.

Now before we get carried away, though, Paul warns us about allowing difference to be overplayed, so that our different gift is viewed as superior to the gifts of others. According to Paul, each gift is for the sake of the common good. Your gift is not for the sake of blowing your own horn, for the upbuilding of your private little ego. Your gift is given so that we together might flourish. The wild spirit of God moves through different people who have different gifts so that together we can become the community we are called to be.

And you must know this. The community we are called to be can be a bit of a wild place. A lot of times what we want to do with

community is to clean it up, to remove all the messiness. My friend Mary Hinkle-Shore says that when we are looking for the Spirit's gifts-- can we say the *Spirit's activity*—we better look for a bit of a mess. When a wild Spirit moves among a diversity of people giving different gifts, you can expect messiness.

During this time of quarantine, I have been spending some time trying to clean up messes around the house. It's so much fun. I feel so much power and joy when I have taken care of one of the projects, when one more cupboard is in order. I then find myself driven to overcome the next mess. Now, I have to tell you, though. It has dawned on me during these projects that, while providing order is commendable, life lived simply on the basis of clean closets is not only shallow, but an illusion. You won't have to go far to find another disordered closet. And besides, living itself means making a mess.

Now, I am going to continue to provide order to that which is disordered; it makes it easier to find stuff. And I don't think God is the author of confusion or even of chaos. But I am convinced that life isn't primarily about cleaning up the mess. Life is primarily about loving the mess, especially the people who live within it.

The story we tell is about a wild God who messes with our lives, messes with our little boxes, messes with our preoccupation with sameness, gives us new and difficult jobs to do, sends us forth with words that aren't even the language that we normally speak. The story we tell is of a wild Spirit who sews diverse gifts among diverse people, creating messy communities. The story we tell (call it the story of Jesus and the cross) is about a God who gets messy with life's hurt, violence, pain, and even death. The story of the Spirit of Pentecost is the story of a wild God who dwells in the midst of messy communities and messy people, sometimes even making them messier, but weaving them

together for the sake of the unifying love that God has for everybody and everything.

And so, we pray, “Come, Holy Spirit, come! Burn in us now. Bring us together. Dwell in us. Change us. Come to us Spirit of God.”