

5/31/20 PENTECOST

Good morning and welcome to our first ever drive-in service and celebration for Pentecost!

This is such a unique occasion and something we'd never have otherwise had reason to do. For some of you this may be the first time you are physically seeing some faces since we stopped meeting at church.

Because not only have we not been meeting here, but school events and other occasions for seeing each other have also not happened.

So it's emotional to be able to see each other this way again, even if from a distance.

The weather has turned out great, but there is a little wind – we apologize if the mics occasionally pick up the wind, and if so, think of it as the wind of the Spirit!

We are very thankful for all of those who collaborated for this unique and new kind of worship service.

While this is a moment of celebration, we also lament the recent milestone of 100,000 deaths from Covid-19 in the United States.

We can have celebration and lament at the same time, because that's how life works. We can't erase the pain, and we can't let the pain prevent us from celebration either.

We have all experienced some level of loss – if nothing else loss of plans. We especially lament the way this virus impacts our elders – those we look up to. And we know that other communities are impacted more severely. We lament the disproportionate rate of infection and death among communities of color. We lament the severe economic crisis that heavily impacts those who were already struggling to get by.

We have a torch here that will be lit shortly representing the presence and shalom of the Holy Spirit. The flame represents the power of the Spirit to make us alive again when we are weary.

If you have a printed bulletin, please join me with words to call each of us to a spirit of worship:

Leader: People of God, look about and see the faces of those we see gathered here.

People: Neighbors and friends, sisters and brothers, sojourners, and even forgotten friends.

Leader: People of God, look about you and see all the images of God assembled here.

People: In me, in you, in each of us, God's Spirit rests for all to see.

All: Holy Spirit, come with power!

Spirit of God,

Come with power. We believe you are real, and not simply the tale of an old Bible story.

Let your flame rest in each of us, and let that flame spread into your broken world.

You are witness to our lament in a time of sickness, death, and hardship, and you are the source of our celebration and hope of the birth of something new.

Come, Holy Spirit!

MORNING PRAYER – LOIS HARDER

God, we are grateful to be here this morning, to be together – still in this unusual kind of togetherness, but able to see one another after these many weeks. We are grateful to be able to sing together, to sing of your faithfulness, about how you gather us in, no matter who we are or what our shortcomings may be. You nourish us and teach us, you hold us and call us. We're grateful that you've sent us your Holy Spirit and through your Spirit you're present with us – our Counselor, Comforter, our redeemer and friend, our savior. We are grateful that you are the God who is with us in our struggles and that you are our hope. Thank you, God, for the safety and security we feel in our lives, especially relative to overwhelming fear and anxiety that some people live with.

We pray, God, for on-going wisdom as we seek guidance for how to move forward in this time. We ask that you would be with group of people who make up the new task force – the group tasked with leading our congregation in the coming weeks and months as decisions are made about when and how to begin meeting together again. We pray for those who live in nursing homes and cannot join us because it feels too dangerous for them. But we know they are tired of their four walls, lonely and longing to see family and friends face to face. Send your comforting love to be with them, God. Be with others in our families and our community who may be healing from injury, illness, surgery or discouragement. Let them know your Holy Spirit presence with them.

God of mercy, we acknowledge that in spite of *our* relative safety, many, MANY people have died of the coronavirus... upwards of 100,000. That is a staggering number of human beings lost to this illness. We grieve their loss. We pray for their families, their friends and loved ones. We also acknowledge that this virus and the destruction it causes does not observe national boundaries or respect people's life circumstances. It ravages everyone it touches, but those who are poor and have fewer resources get the brunt of its fury. O God, we need your Spirit to move our hearts and minds and wills to be your hands and feet in this world, to be the messengers of your mercy and love and compassion so that ALL of your children have what they need to live in peace and unafraid.

We pray for the family of George Floyd as they grieve and reel in the wake of his death. Creator God, let the voices of our black and brown skinned brothers and sisters be heard in this tumultuous time. Let your kingdom come and your will be done in ways that bring justice and reconciliation.

Bless us now as we continue to worship. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord. Amen.

SERMON – “THE SPIRIT REGROUPS US” – CALEB YODER

If it weren't for the pandemic, it wouldn't seem significant for us to be currently gathered in the same place.

Just like the disciples of Jesus were “all together in one place” on the day of Pentecost, before the Spirit showed up like the blowing of a violent wind, and like tongues of fire.

We remember that event as the “birth of the church,” the regrouping of Jerusalem-pilgrims from “every nation under heaven.”

So we wonder what will this moment mean for our church now? If it feels like the pandemic has shut us down, surely the Spirit is working to regroup us and to birth something new.

On that first Pentecost, the apostles experienced the Spirit as a wind and a fire. It's vivid imagery that reminds us of other theophanies or special revelations of God in Scripture, like when Moses went up to meet God, as the Lord descended like fire.

In the Acts account, the writer Luke makes it clear that the Spirit was *like* a wind and *seemed to be* tongues of fire, because you can never pin the Spirit down.

In the biblical languages, Spirit, wind, and breath are all the same word. Jesus said it's like a wind that you don't know where it comes from or where it's going.

Allow yourself to notice the outside breeze, and imagine it's the wind of God.

PENTECOST

Now Pentecost was a harvest festival. Farmers here are thinking about wheat harvest. For the Israelites, Pentecost came seven weeks into the harvest season.

It was like their Threshing Days – a harvest festival drawing people from all kinds of locales. At our Threshing Days, people come from out of state, many of whom have connections to Goessel even if they don't live here.

That seems like a decent comparison with the scene in Acts 2. Then we'd have to imagine that the native language in every region or state was different rather than everyone speaking English.

Now wouldn't you know it, by reading Leviticus about Pentecost, I learned something new!

You see, “Pentecost” simply means “fiftieth,” referring to counting off 50 days or 7 weeks. Counting off from what?

Right after the Passover – the most important festival – they had their first fruits grain offering as they begun the first harvest.

So when the Apostle Paul writes that “*Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep*” (1 Corinthians 15:20), I never realized that Easter Sunday was when some Jews would have been celebrating with their firstfruits offering. Of course, that's part of the meaning of Christ's resurrection.

Which makes Pentecost a second harvest. In Romans 8:23, Paul says, “*we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.*”

You see, we’re all longing for something. And it’s more than resurrection in the ultimate sense, it’s something we can live into now as a church.

We have come together in one physical place in months (even if more than 6 feet apart and in separate vehicles). It will still be some time before we resume worship services as we once knew them.

Yet we know, and should remember, that church isn’t a building. It’s an assembly of people. So maybe now is a good time to ask the question: *what does it really mean to be church?*

Who are we as a church? Who are we in this strange time, and who do we want to be when we come back together more substantially?

We often say that the first Christian Pentecost was the birth of the church. At the end of the account, three thousand of the pilgrims witnessing the event were added to the small number of disciples.

Maybe we don’t need to be reinvented, but what if this Pentecost *is* a time for the Spirit to regroup us, as we expect new birth on whatever happens to lie on the other side of a pandemic.

COMMON LANGUAGE

I don’t want to forget the most memorable part of the Pentecost story: its how a bunch of semi-literate Galilean fisherman suddenly are able to eloquently speak all the languages spoken by the out-of-towners on that day.

This original “speaking in tongues” was about each person present being able to hear God glorified in their native language.

It was not only God speaking their language, but the Spirit breaking down linguistic barriers. Acts 2 specifically names the presence of people from “every nation under heaven.” They were all Jews or Gentile converts to Judaism, already. But we are seeing a trajectory in which the Gospel of Jesus will cross all borders. As Paul says in Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Language is enough of a barrier. You know this if you’ve ever been at a worship service or event in another language as some of you have at our sister church in Dallas.

The Gospel does more than just cross language boundaries or national boundaries. It also crosses class boundaries, cultural boundaries and racial boundaries.

Many of these boundary lines are looming larger in the middle of a pandemic exposing our national inequalities and institutionalized racism.

Some of these boundary lines are arguably much harder than just native language. I came across a plenary speech of a pastor named Duke Kwon.¹ He was discussing the cross-cultural Great Commission of Jesus and named the redlining boundaries of American cities. Redlining was and is a practice where communities of color are denied financial services or given higher prices – something that translated over decades into lower home ownership and far far lower household wealth than for whites.

We are seeing how we are divided between people who have the luxury of staying home without losing income, versus those whose work requires exposing themselves to the virus, while not working thrusts them into poverty.

We are seeing racial divides and tensions become alarming – though there’s really a 400 year history – because statistically people of color are much more likely to get the virus and die from it (since they are more often part of the “exposed” group).

We’ve been hearing in the news the outrage at the disproportionate police killings of black and brown people, most recently with the George Floyd case. There are mass peaceful demonstrations as well as violence from various actors that the media emphasizes. Against the backdrop of a pandemic, it feels like our country is falling apart.

Now you might say, what does this have to do with the church, especially when feel so removed?

But we are part of a larger body of Christ that is both bleeding and also source of seeds of healing.

We might think that we are all the same here. We speak one language – no speaking in tongues or translation needed. Yet our cultural and political polarization is putting us in different camps even within families, tight-knit communities, and congregations.

We might all speak English, but when we speak past each other, we may as well be speaking different languages. It is easier to preach to the choir in your own “tribe” than have hard conversation with someone who might otherwise be close to you, but views the world, faith, or the Bible differently than you do.

There are boundary lines far away, and boundary lines that run close to home.

The crossing of boundaries made possible by the life of Christ leads to righting of wrongs and it leads to healing. Furthermore, it leads to discovering a common language in Christ.

In fact, I’m not sure that it’s possible to fully grasp the Truth that the Spirit leads us into, unless the different “tribes” (of whatever sort) come together.

We need the voices of different nationalities, we need the voices of different cultures, we need the voices of different racial/ethnic groups, we need the voices of different walks of life to come together to the one place.

¹ Duke Kwon, “Speaking the Truth in Love,” at LDR 2017 conference

It doesn't mean that everyone is right, and unlikely that any one person has the corner on Truth. It's also unlikely we easily change each other's minds or habits. That only comes through the influence of longer-term relationships of trust.

How do we come together to hear the Spirit speak a language each of us can understand? How do we discover a common language in Christ?

Church needs to be more than a business catering to each one's private spirituality. It needs to be a home connecting us to each other, connecting to all aspects of life, as the Spirit continually converts us into a new people.

Back before the coronavirus hit, at our leadership retreat, I heard some of you talk about how important it is to build relationships around shared commonalities in order to build the necessary level of trust to invite accountability from each other and talk about our differences.

Those will be some of our goals going forward – creating more trust with one another and speaking both courageously and humbly. We need the courage to challenge those who are “like us,” and the humility to be challenged by those who are “not like me.”

CONCLUSION

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit enabled the message of the love of God in Christ to go out into each of the languages that people present there spoke. The promise of Pentecost is that the Spirit will work to enable the message to go out in each language we speak to call us to new life.

The Spirit will keep speaking until we come to learn a new language. We are firstfruits of this harvest.

BENEDICTION

As you go from this place,
may the wind of the Spirit blow into your life;
may the fire of the Spirit scorch your complacency
and light your way.

And may the blessing of the Holy One rest upon you.