

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe
The Day of Pentecost, May 31, 2020

Chaos, Racism, and Truth

This is the Day of Pentecost. It's normally a day of celebration. On the first Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples. 3,000 were quickly baptized. The church on earth was born.

I had planned all along to focus today on Psalm 104. It is a magnificent litany of praise for God's entire creation. Today we get the second part of the psalm, in which the author bursts out in an exuberant song of joy—as if the psalmist was there on the seventh day, surveying the entire created order. How manifold are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you have made them all!

Pentecost is normally a day of celebration. But what kind of celebration is this? We are not at a party; we are in a crucible. What is a crucible? “A container in which metals or other substances are melted or subjected to very high temperatures.”

How can we sing for joy when we are entering the fourth month of our lives being thrown into turmoil by the pandemic? More pressing, how can we sing for joy when yet another black man has died at the hands of law enforcement, a life stamped out before the alleged infraction could even be discussed? (Now don't walk away – hang in there with me.)

How can we sing when major cities are being devastated by destruction, when each morning one trembles before checking on the previous night's news?

How can we sing when people we know and love have fled the city that they love, as some of our son's friends have done who live in the area of Minneapolis that has been hit hardest?

How can we sing when the area around the church we attend whenever we are in the Twin Cities, also near the Third Precinct, looks like a war zone? I weep for the business owners whose livelihoods have gone up in flames or been crushed beneath shattered glass.

There is no sanction for the destruction of other people's property. “You are disgracing our city,” the black mayor of Atlanta told protesters who were inciting violence. “You are disgracing the life of George Floyd and every other person who has been killed in this country.”

But the fact is that we have once again come face to face with racism, America's original sin. *Especially* as Christians, we cannot turn away. We cannot say, “But that is there, not here.” No – it is here. If you haven't seen it, then keep reading news stories, and read broadly. Read outside of your news comfort zone. This is no time to be comfortable.

Psalm 104 gives us a litany of the wonders of God's creation. I have another litany to share today, one that lays bare America's original sin as seen through the lens of recent tragic events. It begins,

I have privilege as a white person because I can do all of these things without thinking twice:

I can go birding (#ChristianCooper)
I can go jogging (#AmaudArbery)
I can relax in the comfort of my own home (#BothamJean and #AtatianaJefferson)
I can ask for help after being in a car crash (#JonathanFerrell and #RenishaMcBride)
I can have a cellphone (#StephonClark)
I can leave a party to get to safety (#JordanEdwards)
I can play loud music (#JordanDavis)
I can sell CDs (#AltonSterling)
I can sleep (#AiyanaJones)
I can walk from the corner store (#MikeBrown)
I can play cops and robbers (#TamirRice)
I can go to church (#Charleston9)
I can walk home with Skittles (#TrayvonMartin)
I can hold a hair brush while leaving my own bachelor party (#SeanBell)
I can party on New Years (#OscarGrant)
I can get a normal traffic ticket (#SandraBland)
I can lawfully carry a weapon (#PhilandoCastile)
... and it goes on.

If you were to take a bird's eye view of life in America right now, it might look like chaos.

- The pandemic: 100,000 families and counting torn apart by death, loved ones who would not otherwise have died when or how they did.
- Racism: The need to confess, once again, our nation's original sin. When will that confession ever turn our hearts?
- And the church: When we do gather inside again, whenever that is, it's likely to be very different--no singing, no fellowship, no gathering side at the chancel step for communion. What is our future?

In fact, these are not the last days, as Peter suggests in the Acts reading, quoting the prophet Joel. The Holy Spirit, the breath of God, is churning up things that were already there. This must happen before new life can follow. What was already there:

- Infections disease experts have long anticipated a pandemic exactly like this one. The potential was always there; it could have happened at any time.
- The forces that led to the death of George Floyd have festered beneath the surface of the American Dream for 400 years.
- The church has been needing a massive makeover for some time. To allow the body of Christ to decline without intervention is not what Jesus has in mind!

The good news is that the Spirit is also churning up new life. Concerning the pandemic:

- We are slowing down. We are learning to live in a kinder, gentler, more considerate way. We are waving to neighbors we don't know and striking up conversations from the street. We are learning the names and breeds of their dogs.

- We are more aware of the blessings of simply being alive—marveling in the colors around us, breathing in the earth’s rich fragrances.
- We are learning love of neighbor in the form of good hygiene, so that when the flu comes around again, maybe it won’t be so bad. (Ah, if the flu was the only thing we had to worry about!)
- And we are realizing how much people mean to us who we may have taken for granted. I was moved to tears by a driveway in our neighborhood that was completely filled, garage to street, with complex algebraic and geometric equations precisely etched in various colors of sidewalk chalk. Down the left edge in large letters was THANK YOU and down the right edge was the teacher’s name. And in the center, the letters staggered, read: PARTING. At the bottom were two little sailboats, each with a girl’s name. Ellie and Maddy. How those girls loved their math teacher! How they learned to love math! And how blessed we are, as passersby, to share in that love!

Concerning the violence, it is causing us to search our hearts and exhort others to do the same.

And concerning the church, we are beginning to realize that we can leave behind things which haven’t been working and embrace new ways of being the church together. We talk about how much we value our youth, but the fact is that they find our services boring. How can we include them? How can we include others who have been excluded in the past?

One way is to continue our services online even when we are worshiping in the building again. Now those who couldn’t come in person, for whatever reason, can participate from the comfort of their home. We will have our first drive-in service on June 14. Come in your pajamas and bring your breakfast, bring things for the kids to do.

We are going to be discovering many more ways for God’s Spirit to renew the church. Be open to the breath of God blowing through us. Without that living breath, without God’s Spirit, we are not even alive. Listen again to these two lines from Psalm 104, verses 29 and 30:

When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.

When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the earth.

Be filled with the Holy Spirit, and let’s see what God can do.