

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Reconciliation and Renewal

Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost Sunday

May 31, 2020

Yes, indeed, lift up your voices. Is this not the Pentecostal call? Lift up your voices all around. There is a new Spirit blowing and a new wind blowing among us. Pentecost was the unleashing of voices that had been stilled and quieted and stumbling and mumbling for too long. Pentecost unleashed those voices in the fire of the Holy Spirit that individuals who stood alone now stood with brothers and sisters made one in church born that day. Pentecost is a significant day of making one out of many—making a church out of individuals. Pentecost. We've come to Pentecost.

For all who have been on this journey with us during Lent and Easter, this Pentecost is a day of significance. It is, for us, the last Sunday before we intend to live stream worship and meet in person for the first time in months. It seems appropriate that the day which marks the visitation of the Holy Spirit, marks the day for us when we prepare to be church again in new ways. Let it be for us not just a change in format, but the moment of spiritual renewal.

Pentecost is always a day of significance for the church. Fifty days after the Resurrection, ten days after the Ascension of Jesus, Pentecost remembers the unusual and extraordinary experience of the followers of Jesus gathered together in Jerusalem when all heaven broke loose.

Tongues of fire descended on each person; they all began to speak in one another's languages. That which separated them before this moment, now united them in punch-drunk wonder. You're totally different from me, but now you're speaking my language and I can understand you. It's on this experience that the church is born and which Luke emphasizes in great detail in the 2nd chapter of Acts, the mystical experience of unity in their diversity and in the movement of Christ to the human community via the Holy Spirit. They sang songs, they told stories about Jesus; they soberly prepared for the mission that was ahead of them to the ends of the earth.

The Pentecost phenomenon was mystery, unity, and conversion. "What shall we do?" some asked. "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." The church that day knew they were alive in the presence of God, recipients of and heralds of God's redemption, called out from the world for the good and hope of the world's salvation. They saw into the future and believed that what began that day, was what began at Calvary and at Bethlehem and before that at Sinai and at the Oaks of Mamre and at Ararat and at Eden. What began at the dawn of creation, they believed the promise of God was now alive in them as church. "For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

Pentecost, a day of significance, remembers and recalls, the church's essential heartbeat and the church's breath: the living God.

This Pentecost for our church congregation in particular, is meaningful in its own way, even if only a footnote in the unfolding redemption story of the Church's life in God's world.

This has been an unusual season for the church's life in lockdown. This is the last Sunday that we'll worship totally dispersed and through audio recordings. It's been good, and I hope it's been an encouragement and blessing to you. I hope the art we've shared each week has captured your vision and opened new ways of prayer. I hope the time and space to listen to worship has sharpened your listening ears. I hope this season, for all of its pain and hardships, has been good for you. In some ways, I'm going to miss this. I miss seeing you here of course, but there's something very sweet about being in our sanctuary when you're alone or there's just a few people. This is a sweet place. You know that.

Next week, we enter a new season. Next Sunday, at 9 am, we begin live streaming DaySpring worship online, which is a cluster of words we really couldn't imagine stringing together into a sentence just three months ago. But then there's a lot about life these days that we couldn't have imagined just three months ago. Live streaming means that we'll be live, not just recorded. We'll be visible, not just audible. And if all goes well between now and then, this live stream will originate from under the grove of ancient live oak trees near the old water tower, and some people, perhaps many people will accept the invitation to join together under those trees in person for worship for the first time in months. Worshippers on Trinity Sunday and for Sundays to come as far as we can see will be seated under oak trees in casual summer dress, in camp chairs and lawn chairs and on blankets, many wearing masks, physically distanced from one another but delighted to be together again. Yet another set of words hardly possible to imagine stringing into a sentence just a few months ago. Yet, to a person, everyone who has walked under those trees and thought about worshipping under them has said, Goodness why haven't we done this before? This is beautiful.

For some people, next week's worship will mean little has changed from this week to next. They will stay home, wisely. They will open an email early Sunday morning, print a worship guide, then click a link, and worship with their church community. They will do church, and they will be the church. All that will change is that they'll see and not just hear. Those of you who worship with us in this way, welcome. If this is how you will worship with us, good. This is good. Coming to the oaks is not a measure or a test of your faith. If you need to stay home to be safe, stay home and join us online. If you need to stay home to corral your young-un, good, stay in your jammies. If you are sick at all, definitely stay home, and let us know so we can support you in any way needed. For many who have worshipped with us over the last few months, little will change.

For other people, next week's worship will mean a lot changes. You'll come to church earlier than you have in years--maybe ever. It's going to be an earlier morning than you're used to on a

Sunday, but by August in Texas, you'll be glad. You might wear short sleeves to church. You might wear shorts to church. You might bring your own chair to sit in. You'll be outside. You'll wear a mask, if you take our encouragement. And you'll be in for a treat. We'll learn a lot the first couple of Sundays, but we'll hold it lightly and laugh at any bumps in the road. Lord, have mercy, it will be good to see you see one another's faces.

The congregation coming back together online and in person outside still in a pandemic is full of all kinds of challenges, practical and existential. How to host a service outside...how to live stream smoothly... These are some of the practical challenges. Should I come to the church or worship at home? This is the existential question each family will answer. Just know that the question is not a test of your faith, the answer is not a measure of your spirituality or your politics. It's just simply a choice in a complicated season between two invitations. It's win-win. Either way, next week, see you at 9.

Beyond questions practical and existential, the church coming back together online and in person in the wake of Pentecost is an important symbolic opportunity for renewal. We can ignore the symbolism of this, of course, but then we would, in the words of Ron Rolheiser, "botch an opportunity for grace." This is a day of the movement of the Holy Spirit and the life of the Church. This is an opportunity for the grace of renewing our life in the Spirit as persons and as a community in redemptive ministry to God's people in the world. The world has perhaps never needed the church to be renewed by the Spirit as it does now. There is so much brokenness and so much pain and the need for so much mercy by so many, that nothing less than a society of people on a mission of reconciliation will do. The need is tremendous, but we are not alone.

The third article of the Apostle's Creed simply begins, "I believe in the Holy Spirit," followed immediately by belief in the Church. The two are intimately connected by Pentecost. What does that mean for us in these days? Biblical descriptions of the Holy Spirit move us toward personal and missional renewal.

In Galatians, St. Paul tells us there are two kinds of spirit, the spirit that opposes God—a spirit of envy, anger, gossip, factionalism, idolatry, impurity, self-centeredness, and bitterness. This spirit, in simple language, brings destruction and pain to ourselves and everyone around us. Conversely, there is the Holy Spirit, the *pneuma* of the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

In terms of personal renewal, one of the things we might do is ask if we are deluding ourselves about what spirit we often live with and embody. If my life contains more envy than graciousness, more anger than delight, more gossip than praise, more self-centeredness than compassion, more impurity than chastity, more bitterness than gratitude, then I am not living in the Holy Spirit, no matter what I claim about myself (Rolheiser). But I can change. Change is always possible, for anyone. *Pneuma* means breath, wind, movement. We ask God to change our heart and change our spirit and we are amazed at what God can do, even in you. Personal

transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit. We each can open our hearts to this work of the Spirit on us toward personal renewal.

The most common word for Spirit is *pneuma*, breath, wind, movement. If the movement of the Spirit stops with me, even if I am being personally renewed, then the Spirit's work in me has yet not been completed. The work of the *paraclete* is nothing less than a radical spirit of community and love.

In the Gospel of John, the Holy Spirit is described as a *paraclete*, a comforter, an advocate, a lawyer for the poor and vulnerable. The *paraclete* pleads their case and defends their cause. In the Gospel of John, Jesus breathes on the disciples the Holy Spirit, the defender of the accused, the victimized, the scapegoat, anyone whose life is treated as if it doesn't matter. To live in the Holy Spirit *paraclete* is to be an advocate and defender of the God-given dignity of those pushed face down with the boot of social injustice pressing down upon their necks until they can't breathe.

At Pentecost, the Church is born in the breath of God, the Holy Spirit, the person and principle of personal renewal and justice in our communities. The Church, born of the *pneuma*, born of the *paraclete*, is being reborn in this season for such a time as this, reborn in the Spirit by whom Christ breathes life in and through us. Let the church that begins to come together under the oaks and in sanctuaries and living rooms all over the world be a church reborn in this life-giving breath of the living God.

And so, let us, in this new season, come together in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the house or under the trees, the Spirit of God will be with us, bringing on her wings the grace of personal renewal and the grace of mercy for all God's children.

That all may say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit. And I believe in the church."

Amen

<http://ronrolheiser.com/1998-the-year-of-the-holy-spirit/#.Xs1upBNKifV>

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