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“Baptism By Fire”

Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2020

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

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Holy Scriptures: Acts 2: 1-21

The Coming of the Holy Spirit

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

Peter Addresses the Crowd

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ *‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.*

¹⁸ *Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.*

¹⁹ *And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.*

²⁰ *The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,*

*before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*

Baptism by Fire

Today is Pentecost Sunday,
a holy, liturgical day set apart to remember and celebrate
the birth of the church,
the blessings of the Holy Spirit,
the gift of the Beloved Community
to proclaim the Good News,
to point the world to the saving acts of God.

Today begins the season of Pentecost,
a season that lasts for 26 weeks
to study and learn and practice what it means to be Church,
to be and share the Good News as God's Beloved Community.

The Day of Pentecost reminds us that, first and foremost,
we were baptized by fire
into a significant Church in which we belong together.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.

*² And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind,
and it filled all the house where they were sitting.*

*³ And there appeared to them tongues as of fire,
distributed and resting on each one of them.*

*⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues,
as the Spirit gave them utterance.*

Baptism by Fire

Why is it we only learn the hard way?
What do you think?

The late, beloved Bonnie Darsie liked to say she was a graduate of SHK.
She said she earned her diploma from the School of Hard Knocks.
We can relate.

Start a new job,
we learn on the go by trial and error.
Move into a new environment,
we discover our way around by getting lost then finding our way.

Join a church or a book club or a neighborhood group,
we stumble and bumble our way through myriad human relationships,
learning by hook and crook who's kind, who's cranky,
what irritates this one over here, what inspires that one over there.

Why is it we only learn the hard way?

Why does it seem to always require a **Baptism by Fire**?

Term comes to us from John the Baptist.

The whole people of God went out from their cities and villages to find John the Baptist,
to find hope, to find new life,
to emerge from the River Jordan a new creation, reborn by Big Love.

John the Baptist invited them to repent and be baptized, saying:

*"I baptize you with water for repentance,
but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me;
I am not worthy to carry his sandals.*

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." --Matthew 3:11

John the Baptist and later St. Peter [in Acts]

 speak of the purification of our souls,

 when we are set ablaze by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Just like Moses experienced when standing in awe in front of a burning bush,

 gazing at glory, hearing the call of God,

 being charged and having his life course changed,

 the Holy fire of God transforms, not consumes;

 the Spirit cleanses and revives, not devours or detours;

 the Spirit does not exhaust, but rather exalts and amplifies.

Like it or not, we are baptized with fire.

The trials and challenges of our life and times refine us,

 shape us, purify and burn away impurities and excess.

With the grace of God, we are called and charged, together,
to be the Body of Christ.

The purpose of the Body of Christ

 is to be and share the Good News of God's love.

Today – and everyday -- we celebrate

 that we have been anointed by the Holy Spirit.

We are filled with the Holy Spirit.

We are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

We are baptized by the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Even so, why is we only learn the hard way?

We may have to learn some lessons the hard way, today, yet that's okay,
we are used to it,
'cause we are continuously matriculating into the School of Hard Knocks.

This week poses (at least) two questions to ponder, to chew on, to learn from.

One, What Does the Church Need to Hear?

Two, What Does the Church Need to Say?

What Does the Church Need to Hear?

We who are baptized by the Holy Fires of God
need to hear the suffering of God's people.

Such cries for help and hope are not always pretty, or gentile, or sweet.
They are, however, real.

Authentic.

Heartfelt.

Angry.

Frustrated.

And if/when we don't hear them, don't listen...Lord, have mercy on us.

In Exodus, God heard the suffering of the Hebrews,
and sent Moses to deliver them,
to draw them out from Egypt
just as Moses had been drawn out of the water.

In the Gospels and Book of Acts,
God heard the suffering of the Hebrews and then the Gentiles
and then you and me,
and sent Jesus Christ for our deliverance.

Today God hears the suffering of our neighbors,
and is sending the Church to be a force of liberation,
to deliver Good News and bring out from the waters
the broke and broken, the oppressed and afflicted.

The Church needs to hear the suffering of God's people,
and quit playing games with who suffers more or less or when or how.

Suffering is not comparable.

No one should say "I suffer more than you" "my people suffer more than yours"

because everyone suffers.
Suffering is universal because life is difficult.
To live is to suffer.
We all have pain.
Loss.
Heartache.
40 million of our neighbors are suddenly, sadly unemployed.
Let's not compare pain like it's a game or competition.
Suffering is not comparable.

However, not all suffering is identical.
Some suffering is a part of life and everyday living;
 some suffering is inflicted,
 perpetrated by people upon people with ill intent and ill effects,
 whether *de facto* or *de jure*.

We need to not only respect and recognize each other,
 we need to respect and recognize undeserved suffering in our world today.

The Church needs to hear the cries of our brothers and sisters
 who are systematically oppressed and wronged, harmed and killed,
 whether on a lonely road in Syria or on a city street in Minneapolis.

The Church needs to hear the demands that insist justice be dispersed equally,
 fairly, honestly, without senseless violence or prejudice or discrimination.

The Church needs to hear voices raised in protest,
 in direct defiance of acts of racism,
 in audacious hope for liberation, saying:
 "*Respect existence, expect resistance*"
 "*No justice, no peace; Know justice, know peace*"

The Church needs to hear the self-identifying statement Black Lives Matter
 as an affirmation of the worthiness of souls
 whom the world so often, in so many ways,
 attempts to define as worthless, expendable, less than.

The Church needs to hear Black Lives Matter as a declaration of hope, of pride and joy.

As Georgia's own James Brown sang, "*Say it loud: I'm Black and I'm proud!*"

The Church needs to hear the cries of a hurt and hurting generation: "Pay attention!"
Pay attention to what's going on,
 to what's happening in our community.

See me, say our neighbors; hear me, feel me, love me as I am.
Respect and recognize me, my people, mine own.

The Church needs to hear, again, as Jesus preached in Matthew's Gospel,
that our salvation is tied to one another.
Did you care for the hungry, the naked, the lost, the oppressed?

A gentleman arrived in heaven and God opened wide the gates,
then looked around and asked, *"Where is everyone else?
Where are those you were called to care for, to bring with you?"*

We are linked, tied, bonded together
by a covenant of love,
a covenant that binds us together in heaven as well as here on earth.

Rozella Haydée White said:

*"I've been participating in an online conference this week
called The Wellness of We. [\[1\]](#)*

*"One of the presenters said, "I am not interested in allies. I have erased this word from
my vocabulary. I am interested in folks who understand that our liberation is
interconnected." [Anasa Troutman]*

*"When I heard these words, my spirit leapt and I was instantly reminded of a quote that
is credited to Lilla Watson, an Aboriginal activist from Australia:*

*"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come
because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." [Aboriginal Activist
Groups, Queensland, 1970s.]*

Rozella Haydée White went on to say:

*"I don't need you—White people—to help me. I need for you—White people—to
recognize your sinfulness; your brokenness and woundedness, and to repent.*

*"I need you to turn away from the sin that is White Supremacy and the lies that fear and
scarcity pedal; lies that lead you to continue to invest in whiteness rather than divest from
whiteness.*

*"I need you to be born again, into your God-given humanity, a humanity we share and
one that reminds us that we belong to one another.*

*"I need you to understand that you have nothing that can help me. Rather, we share a
reality that is dependent upon our shared liberation in order to see the Kingdom of Heaven, here
on earth.*

*"And our ever-faithful Creator, the Triune God, has gifted us with the sustenance and
power we need in the Holy Spirit."*

The Church, my friends, is listening.

Now, What Does the Church Need to Say?

My friends, having listened, having heard, seeking to understand:

- The fires that destroy and devour homes and businesses smolder and smoke.
- The fires that burn in hearts and minds for injustices done, in our name, by our people against our own people.
- The fires that rage for respect and recognition and righteousness.

Having heard, we've got something to say to the community and the world.

The Church has what it takes to build healthy, healing, hope-filled relationships.

You see, we've been drawn by God out of the baptismal waters, dripping wet,
resurrection drenched,
called and charged to deliver, to reconcile, to connect.

Dancing on our heads, so we can't blow them out, are tongues of fire.

We've been baptized by the Holy Spirit and fire;
we've been tried and tested;
we've been anointed and charged to serve and love.

We say to you that God loves you, and we do, too.

We testify that God plucked us up and out of the muck,
drew us out of the water,
purified us with the fires of truth and justice,
redeemed our sin-sick souls
and set us free to be, you and me.

We are humbled by our mistakes
and continue to learn from the errors of our ways.

But by the grace of God we would not be here to serve you and love you.

We say to you that the Holy Spirit is the antidote to prejudice, to racism, to divisions.
God's Spirit is given equally, to one and all.
God's Spirit is inclusive by intent and unifying in nature.

We say to you that our liberation is interconnected.

We as a Church, a Community of Faith,
share a mutually agreed upon covenant,
a relationship grounded in concern, care, compassion for each other
and for the wider community.

In Dr. King's [Letter from Birmingham Jail](#), dated April 16, 1963, he wrote:

"I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states.

*I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta
and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham.”
“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.
We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,
tied in a single garment of destiny.
Whatever affects one directly,
affects all indirectly.”
“I can never be what I ought to be
until you are what you ought to be,
and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.
This is the inter-related structure of reality.”*

Sounds like a covenant we can be and share...a covenant to live out and live into.

This week an image in the NYer magazine, drawn by Benjamin Schwartz,
shows a young person reclining under a shady tree,
plucking petals of a daisy, saying:
*“Dystopian future, utopian future;
dystopian future, utopian future...”*

We the Church say to you: Here is hope.
Here is a bright future today, one that is neither dystopian nor utopian,
but rather a shared village built on a foundation of love, together.
Here is a future with God and one another, in which everyone belongs.
You belong.
I belong.
We belong together.
Church, will you say that with me?
We belong together.
We belong...

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

¹¹ <https://churchanew.org>, “Racism in America: What Will We Preach This Sunday?” Ms. Rozella Haydée White, Owner, Coach, and Consultant, RHW Consulting. May 29, 2020.