

31 May 2020

Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-11; John 20:19-23

“He breathed on them...Receive the Holy Spirit,” said Jesus to his Apostles to free them.

“I can’t breathe,” said George Floyd on a Minneapolis street with a police officer’s knee on his throat.

“Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire...and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.” They were empowered to preach and love and heal. Though they were different and spoke different languages, all could hear them speaking in their own language. They were united.

Then, fires were lit in south Minneapolis, burning police stations, stores and other buildings. Chaos and destruction reigned.

I’ve never experienced a sadder Pentecost. For every powerful image of God and Love and Peace, there is something from our news in recent days that shows just the opposite.

Hearing the news of a Black man, George Floyd, killed by a white officer, one of our own parishioners who is African American asked her mom, “Will this happen to me?” THAT should be a wake-up call to all of us in calm Eau Claire. Come Holy Spirit. We have children afraid that they will be physically assaulted because of the color of their skin. A national sports reporter who is Black said on the news “It’s hard to be Black in America. Honestly, I wake up every day and wonder if today might be the day I get pulled over, harassed, attacked.” Come Holy Spirit.

What of the riots? The mayor of Atlanta, Keisha Lance Bottoms, pleaded with the rioters in her city, “God home! You are not honoring the life of George Lloyd with your violence. You are not honoring but betraying the legacy of MLK and the civil rights movement with your looting and violence. If you want change, vote! Right now you’re resembling what you oppose. Go home!” Another commentator, Van Jones, commented that Mayor Bottoms gave an important message calling people to their better selves. She didn’t call them “thugs” and put them down but reminded them of who their heroes were and who they can be.” Then he also said that the riots are not surprising. When people speak and are not heard, they shout. When people shout and are not heard, they scream. When people scream and are not heard, they throw things.”

Rev. Al Sharpton came to Minneapolis and said that while we should want peace, a lot of people just want quiet, which is different from peace. Quiet is just when rioting stops. Peace is the result of underlying justice so that people feel no need to protest. An army can make things quiet, but only justice can bring peace. He was basically quoting Pope Paul VI who said as much in 1972 on the World Day of Peace.

Is there an underlying culture of racism in the Minneapolis Police Dept that would allow for three of the offending officer’s colleagues to stand and watch and not stop their colleague after hearing “I can’t breathe”? Come Holy Spirit. I don’t know but I believe it’s likely. I believe it’s likely because I see in our own church hierarchy a culture of priestly privilege and protecting our own that covered up and so allowed the abuse of children for so many years. Come Holy Spirit. Heal them, heal us, renew the face of the earth.

When I was a kid I used to think I was selfish singing the lyrics to that song “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.” Why begin with me—like I get the first piece of cake? No, not like that. Like when there is so much unfairness and hurt in the world, come Holy Spirit and if I can’t change the world at least change me, to celebrate instead of fear difference, to be wise enough to detect racism and other social evils when I see them, and courageous enough to do something about it. Use me, use us, your People, to renew the face of the earth.

Scholars think that the story of Pentecost we heard in the first reading would have been written the way it was if the story of the Tower of Babel were not written the way it was. You might recall that story where the people originally all spoke one language and wanted to build a great city with a tower that reached to the sky, which could be interpreted as heaven. God was displeased at human pride and a desire to rise up to heaven and so made it so they all spoke different languages and could no longer cooperate to build this tower. The moral: When we become alienated from God, we become alienated from one another.

This Pentecost, let us thirst for the healing presence of the Holy Spirit, that breath from the mouth of God that offers us mercy, that we might be reconciled with God and equipped to be peacemakers in our world.