

Sunday May 24th: Pentecost

John 7:37-39

Acts 2:1-21

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Well today is Pentecost. The Feast of first fruits, of first harvest. Fifty days after Easter! I invited Nicole to invite a friend to help her read our scripture today because, well, there is a lot to be read and heard. These long lists of ethnic identities from Acts can be reminiscent of some of our Old Testament origin stories with the long lists of so and so, begot so and so, and on and on and on to the point of losing our attention all together, but our list today is very poignant because it represents a much larger picture. This long list of nations seems like the most important part of the story declaring that the proclamation or miracle of Pentecost was not to erase difference but the creation of connection across difference. Pentecost wasn't just for some, it was for all.

And because my brain thinks in musicals, I have been pondering the musical Hairspray for the weeks leading up to this Sunday. There's a scene in Hairspray that takes place not on the television set where so much of the story unfolds, but out on the streets of Baltimore. For those less familiar with the story line, the context is a very polarized Baltimore in which the political climate is shaped by racial segregation and the social change of the 1960's.

The particular scene I am referring to, begins at the end of a school day and transitions out to a street corner. It's a neighborhood gathering, alive with music and dancing, where Seweed and his friends turn an ordinary street corner into something sacred. Full of rhythm, laughter, and life. The scene is vibrant, and unapologetically black. A celebration of culture and identity in a world that keeps trying to push that identity to the margins.

The song they sing, "Run and Tell That," is all about pride. It is a song about refusing to hide who you are. Seweed and other black teens sing and dance with bold joy, celebrating the very features and parts of themselves that society tells them should be made smaller or quieter. Instead, they are claimed. Boldly. He and his friends sing as if to say: this is who I am, and there is beauty in it. There is power in it. So run and tell that good news.

Into that existing scene walk Tracy and Penny and Link. Three white kids, raised in a world divided by invisible but very real barriers: racial barriers, social barriers, assumptions about who belongs where. At first, they are outsiders, just watching. But the music has a way of reaching beyond those boundaries. The joy in that place is so real, so embodied, that it begins to draw them in.

A foot starts tapping. A smile breaks open. Before long, they are dancing too! What begins with a few young people on a street corner of Baltimore becomes something larger, because, joy like this can't stay contained. The song spreads through the street. The dancing spreads on the bus ride all the way to the black neighborhood. The courage spreads too. As Tracy steps into that space, her world begins to change. She sees people she had been taught to keep at a distance not as strangers, but as bearers of beauty, truth, and belonging. As friends. The music opens them up to each other in a way that other outlets had not. The song and its lyrics are contagious as they sing with pride inviting all those around them to "run and tell that." That being the message of love and equality that beckons them to share with all those within reach.

The things that separate them start to vanish. Music and dance serves here as a language that they all speak and share. And of course I am telling you all this because I believe it is connected to Pentecost. All of this makes me think of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe because my homiletics professor in seminary was adamant that the Holy Spirit was an African American Woman sporting a pencil skirt and stiletto heels. A real presence and force to be reckoned with, but more likely, because I relate to the Spirit a lot like a melody or a movement that takes hold of us. It starts as a foot tap and it expands into a full on flash mob with all kinds of people from different places, different cultures, different experiences, different belief systems, all dancing together in unison as one might expect from a musical.

Pentecost is the invitation to see the Spirit as bold and powerful through the images of wind and fire. Here, the Holy Spirit proves not to be quiet or gentle as in other descriptions throughout scripture. Not a dove, or breath, water, or oil, but a strong force. Fire and a wind that blows the church into being. Sharing the message of heavenly proclamation to all the people.

Pentecost is transformative for many reasons, but it is transformative because it's radical, it's tangible, it's accessible. Instead of God just being present in the temple, God is present in and to each of us. Imagine growing up, observing God's law, you love the Lord and for many lifetimes God has used only a few people...and showed up in only a few places, primarily dwelled in the temple. The thought that God would come in as a mighty rushing wind and as flames and not fill a temple but a home, and not just a home but a people. All people received the Spirit that day and in felt very different from the expectations and experiences of the past.

Pentecost wasn't the first time God shattered the expectations people had inherited for generations. In many ways, Jesus had already begun breaking those molds long before the rushing wind and tongues of fire arrived. We talked about what it means to be a disciple in Junior High youth group this past year. To "follow in the dust of your Rabbi." We talked about how only the best of the best, the cream of the crop were selected to apprentice a Rabbi.

Following them so closely, learning from their every move, word and response to the point that they would be covered in the dust of the wise one they followed around all day. And then, God broke all the molds in Jesus, and Jesus broke this mold of what a Rabbi or teacher was when he chose and called everyday, ordinary people to follow him. The spirit stirs us, disrupts us, and Pentecost reminds us how all are filled with the Holy Spirit and in this instance we hear how they were all given the ability to speak across divisions. Hearing each other in their native languages.

So yes, Pentecost is about speaking, but it is largely about listening. Hearing others, pausing to search for the things that unite us.

So what are we going to do about it?

No one of us can unite everybody from every nation but the Holy Spirit can. Distributing the fire of the Holy Spirit on not just some, but all of us God clearly had a goal in mind of connecting the world. Not getting everyone to the same place, to respond, to think alike, but to truly see and hear one another. It is no secret that there is so much disconnect right now. Things we historically agreed on we share no longer. Areas in which we have achieved social progress we see rapid backsliding.

We live in a time when so much of our country feels divided. Neighbors sorted into camps, communities fractured by fear, and faith too often used as a line drawn to separate us as opposed to a bridge all that connects us. There are voices today that claim God belongs to one nation, one vision, one kind of person. Christian nationalism tells a story that the Spirit speaks only to some. To those who look, think, worship, or vote a certain way. And though I certainly know how I feel about all of that, knowing how to interrupt it and change it, is much more complex.

How do we the people of Love First create, speak, and live a counter narrative. Like the one of Pentecost that presents us all with the gift to prophesy, to dream dreams and see visions. My understanding of the task of Pentecost is to point to a very different narrative than the one being created by people with access to TV cameras, microphones and social media algorithms.

My understanding of Prophecy is to tell a different story. The story of how the Spirit does not descend to make one group more powerful than another, but to break down ALL the walls that separate us. The miracle is not that everyone suddenly becomes the same. The miracle is that people from different languages, regions, and experiences hear the same good news and are brought into relationship with God and one another.

And it all matters so much right now. It has mattered for a long time actually. The call and mission of the church is to reach all nations. Not with a lasso, not with bombs or submarines, not with grand revivals at our nations capital but by being in relationship. By listening to one another by "all being gathered in the same space."

Now, not unlike the illustration of Hairspray in the 60's : courage and bravery are required.

Even in our scripture text those who crossed lines or broke boundaries, or served as truth tellers were mocked, called crazy accused of being, "drunk with new wine." Because this idea of unity and equality still seems so radical to this world. This idea of Grace and this idea of a God who pours out the Holy Spirit feels frivolous or ridiculous. This idea that God's love, impact and influence can be conjured up or purchased as opposed to freely and generously given.

Well I hate to break it to you church, but it is our task, our responsibility and our privilege to bear witness to a Spirit that cannot be contained by borders, parties, or ideologies. The Spirit whether we are ready or not, moves among all people. It speaks through voices we may not expect.

It disrupts our rigidity around the concept that God is only rooting for some of us.

And perhaps that is the church's work in a polarized world: not to erase our differences, but to become a people who trust that the Spirit is powerful enough to meet us across them. To listen when someone's story is unlike our own. To believe that God can move between people with different perspectives and create not uniformity, but communion.

The world tells us that difference must lead to division.

The Spirit tells us that difference can become connection. The spirit showed up in community a place where all were gathered. It shows up here. All the time! In our Elders, in our young people, in the music, we count on it to show up in our preaching and we plan on it to show up in this space.

The Spirit moves at the speed of Courage AND it moves when we feel completely void of courage too.

Not always in the places we expect.

Not always in the spaces we've polished and prepared.

And when it moves, it doesn't stay small.

It spills out.

It crosses lines we thought were fixed.  
It pulls people in who didn't think they belonged.  
It loosens what has been held tight.

It calls us all to join in the dance.

You don't have to understand it fully to feel it.  
You don't have to be ready to be changed by it.

You just have to step in.

And once you do...

it gets into your feet,  
your voice,  
your very being...

And before long, what started with a few becomes something no barrier can quite hold back.

Because that's what the Spirit does.

It moves.

It spreads.

It is within you. Run and tell That!