

The Spirit Has Left the Building

Pentecost, May 31, 2020

John 14:15-17, 25-27, Acts 2:1-21

Center Church, Hartford

The Rev. Dr. Rochelle A. Stackhouse

Every year we celebrate Pentecost, dressing up in red because the Holy Spirit came with tongues of fire and fired people up, proclaiming the birthday of the Christian Church!

What exactly does the text tell us happened that day, the first day of church being church? Was everyone given a bulletin and invited to sit still for an hour? Was everyone told to memorize a set of scriptures or theological principles? Was everyone taught a prayer or a song?

No. None of the above. We are told that the Holy Spirit fired up a small group of men and women and gave them the power to communicate with people who spoke different languages than they did, who came from different countries than they did, who had a variety of beliefs and practices but a common story (all the speakers and listeners were Jews, we are told). We are told Jesus' followers, by the power of that fiery Spirit, overcame whatever fear of persecution or shyness or hesitation about speaking in public they may have had.

The Christian Church began, we are told, with a group of people passionately and confidently telling a story to those they did not know. The Christian Church began outside the walls of any house or formal worship space with those who loved Jesus telling others about who he was and what he taught and how he healed and fed and crossed boundaries of every kind, like the boundaries of language and nationality that divided those in the crowd that day. The Christian Church began with a mass gathering in the streets.

The Christian Church began, we are told, with people so full of excitement about helping others connect with Jesus that some folk thought they must be drunk, even though it was still morning!

The first sermon, we are told, included Peter quoting from the prophet Joel about the Spirit being poured out on all flesh, everyone, with the result that new visions and dreams would come with prophecies. In the Bible, the word Prophecy doesn't usually mean a prediction of the future, the way we often use it now. It meant a word from God for the people, a message.

The Christian Church began with a message from God and with dreams and visions from old and young, rich and poor, women and men. With a rejection of things the way they were in society, in politics, and in religion. Something new.

I have to tell you that last night, as I watched cities across the US burn, I felt like the post-Pentecost Christian church had become an utter failure. If people truly had heard and remembered what Jesus taught and opened themselves to the work of the Holy Spirit, over all the generations since the first Pentecost, we would not be in this place. People would never have been made chattel slaves, or been judged by skin color or national origin to be “less than.” Or treated like property, even long after slavery ended. People who identify as Christians today would not be turning a blind eye to the systemic racism that results in so much death, poverty, disease, and mass incarceration. If the church had been truly the Holy Spirit church, people experienced these struggles would have had a place of support and strength and solidarity.

Yes, I know it is not all failure, that the churches over time have lived out Jesus’ call faithfully in many ways, and that there were many people of faith leading and participating in protests this week. But friends, this is a huge mountain to climb. Whatever our ancestors did that was good; whatever we are doing that is good, is not enough. We are not full of the fire of building up in the face of the fires of tearing down.

John’s gospel tell us that one function of the Spirit is to remind us of all Jesus has said to us. If we could just do that, the world might be transformed. So, what do you remember about what Jesus has said to us?

Seriously, what do you remember about what Jesus said to us? Write something you remember down in chat if you are on Zoom or in the comments on Facebook. Open your mind to the Spirit for a few minutes and remember.

In the Pentecost story, you are those who have already met Jesus. You are not those who have not yet heard the story. It may seem tempting to think that there is no one out there who hasn’t heard the story. You would be wrong, very wrong. We are the ones who remember things like (repeat what people have written). Have you allowed yourself, have I, to share that with someone else in some form, someone who either has never heard the stories (over half of people in the US under the age of 25 have had no religious teaching at all and only know what they hear on the news, which is often a mean and warped or lifeless version of the gospel), or someone who heard them long ago and has forgotten. You may

need to ask the Spirit to help you tell the story in words that can be understood by people who may be different from you, and with a power you may think you do not have, but the Spirit, as we have seen, is able to do that, if we can clear our heads long enough to let the Spirit take over our words, hearts and minds sort of like a webinar takes over your computer!

I am glad some days that we are not living our life as a church primarily by talking only to each other inside a building. Truthfully, that is not what the church was ever meant to be. These days, full of fear, full of hate, full of anger, full of violence, full of the kinds of overt racism and sexism many of us keep praying will be buried in the past, these days we need to be reminded of what Jesus taught and how Jesus lived. We need to be reminded of who we are, so that we can tell others this life-giving, world-changing, saving, story. ***We tell it not to save one person's soul from hell, but to save the world from embodying hell for so many in daily life.***

Before he died, Jesus promised the disciples that the Spirit would come to them, and Jesus described that Spirit as being “the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees nor knows that Spirit. But you do, Jesus said, because that Spirit lives in you.” If we ever needed proof that the world has trouble receiving the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of love, all we need to do is pay attention.

What can we do about that? What the followers of Jesus did on Pentecost. Tell the story. Find the Spirit-truth, even if it is hard to hear and hard to speak. Reach out beyond the confines of whoever you define as “your people.” Trust the Spirit when you are afraid to share this with someone else because they might reject you, or maybe think you’re a dreamer. That’s on them, not on you. Tell it with joy and excitement and hope, to invoke those feelings in another, not with threats of punishment or fear as so many do. I guarantee you that if three thousand people were baptized the day of Pentecost, it was because they heard something that struck them as true, compelling, just, joyful, hopeful, life-giving.

Beloved, press the “share” icon in your soul. And on your screen. And in your speech. And in your actions. And all of the above. We are the descendants of the Pentecost people! Remember who you are! Amen.