

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

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

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

'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.

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

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

The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"

And the Slaves will Prophecy - June 5, 2022

Acts 2:1-21

It's a shame that Pentecost gets so little attention. I mean, kudos to Lorrie and everyone for making our sanctuary beautiful once again. I hope those of you at home are wearing your red and white! Pentecost is the third great celebration of the church each year, alongside Christmas and Easter. To be honest, this day of Pentecost is as equally significant as the birth of Jesus at Christmas and the resurrection of Jesus at Easter. Pentecost is the birthday of the Church, which is the culmination of Jesus' work on earth. Jesus spent his ministry preaching, teaching, healing, and training his followers to carry on his message. Pentecost is the day when Jesus' message really starts to spread around the world. After all, if the good news of Jesus didn't get out into the world, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection would have been pointless. Jesus started it, but his disciples had to carry it forward.

In a way, I am grateful that Pentecost is free from all the commercialized baggage associated with Christmas and Easter. We don't exchange Pentecost gifts. There are no Pentecost Trees, Pentecost Eggs, or Pentecost bunnies. Yet, without Pentecost, no one would know about Christmas or Easter because there would be no one to spread the good news.

Perhaps the reason we don't take Pentecost seriously is that for 2000 years, we have taken the church for granted. In this country, in our lifetimes, the church has always been here. Unlike the church in other parts of the world, the American church has never been under any significant threat. No question, there was a time when Roman Catholics were regarded with suspicion and there is still, sadly, plenty of Protestant preaching against the Pope. But so far, our government has not set itself up to legally oppose the church and so we continue on.

Maybe that's the problem. The church has been taken for granted for so long that it seems that it is no longer relevant. Maybe we have accomplished our mission in spreading the good news and can now fade away. After all, Pentecost was all about spreading the word about Jesus Christ. Ok, well that's been done, hasn't it? Everyone's heard of Jesus. Everyone's had the opportunity to accept him or reject him. It seems we're at a time where most folks say, "Jesus is just all right with me." But so what!

Who are we as a church? What do we stand for? What do we have to offer the world, anyway? On this Pentecost, this birthday of the Church, perhaps the real question is, should we continue to exist?

Good question. Let's be frank. Our particular congregation is in the process of joining with another, selling our building, and concluding our ministry to this community. We are hardly different from the dozens and hundreds of churches that close their doors every year in our country. For a while, European churches marveled at how their American counterparts stayed open in spite of all the

pressures to close. After all, church attendance in Europe fell precipitously in the 60s and 70s. At the time, America was an anomaly in the developed world.

But now, we are becoming just like the rest of the developed world. American churches are closing in droves. I can hardly speculate on what and where our Presbyterian denomination will be in ten years, let alone fifty or one hundred years. I expect, if trends continue, that Christianity will soon be regarded as a simple, antiquated belief system that has no place in “modern” society. Most people will regard Jesus Christ as a myth and his teachings ridiculous and having no place in our so-called advanced society.

In short perhaps humanity in the 2000s has outgrown the church, has outgrown Christ.

Now, you would be right if you think I am delivering a rather negative, pessimistic sermon. I mean Collingswood Presbyterian Church, a congregation with a story and a reputation that stretches back over one hundred years, has been on the forefront of standing for a progressive, inclusive understanding of Christianity. Next week, we are celebrating Pride Sunday, a worship service that deliberately will honor God’s vision of humanity which welcomes and loves all human beings. Yes! God made us all and God loves us all equally! That is the best news of all!

But over the centuries, the Church of Jesus Christ, far from being a welcoming and accepting and loving institution, a reflection the ministry of the Son of God — the church is seen by many to have evolved into this judgmental, hateful, spiteful, money-worshiping, power-worshiping institution that exists solely to promote the needs and desires of the elite at the top, instead of the rejects and slaves Jesus loved.

There is no question that average people have a negative opinion of the Church and frankly, they have every right to call the Church in general nothing more than a bunch of hypocrites.

Friends, you know I have not hesitated to criticize the institutional Church because of its failings. You know I have confessed that there are times when I am hesitant to identify myself as a Christian minister because Christian ministers have so often been rightly called out as thieves, charlatans, and people who care only about money and power.

Yet, yet, yet on this Pentecost Sunday, on this birthday of the Church, on this day when Jesus’ vision of regular human beings carrying his message to all of humanity, I am strangely encouraged. Yes, while we all have plenty of reason to despair, there is also reason, wonderful reason to hope.

Friends, so often, too often on this Pentecost Day, we focus on the glitz and the noise. Yes, we hear the story of the Holy Spirit sweeping over the followers and “tongues of fire” appearing over their

heads, and the followers streaming out *en masse* into the regular people, speaking in different languages.

Yes, amazing! Yes, impressive! Yes, as many of pointed out, Pentecost is a kind of reversal of what happened at the Tower of Babel, where God confused the languages of human beings and divided us from one another. Suddenly, at Pentecost, God made it clear that the voice of Jesus, the voice of Good News, the voice of true unity, would now be heard by all and spoken by all. Men and women, slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles, all would now speak the Good News of Jesus Christ to all human beings. Now, now, now, all human beings could hear for themselves, regardless of race, color, religion, nationality, gender, or any other aspect of who they are. In short, Pentecost is partly about everyone now having access to God no matter what! Surely, that is Good News!

Yet, friends, even that Good News isn't good enough. If Pentecost were merely about the disciples fanning out to talk to people about Jesus in their native languages, that would not be good enough. What! Surely all people need to hear about Jesus! Surely all people need to understand the Good News in the ways appropriate to them! Yes, that's true. But it is not enough.

Friends, the Good News of Jesus' love for humanity is useless, is useless I tell you, unless it can be applied to life right here and right now. And that, that, that, friends is where the ignored part of Pentecost comes in.

Not only did Jesus gift his followers with the ability to speak in many languages, Jesus through the Holy Spirit gifted his followers with the voice of prophesy.

Ahh prophesy, one of the most misunderstood words in our faith.

On that Pentecost Day, Peter told the crowds that, "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy."

What does that mean? What does it mean that they shall prophesy?

Well, maybe we should remind ourselves of what prophecy is and what it is not. First prophecy is not, utterly not, fortune-telling. We are woefully wrong if we regard prophecy from a Biblical standpoint as simply consisting of crazy men and women somehow trying to predict the future.

No. No. A thousand times No. Prophecy, in the Biblical sense, in the Christian sense, is not at all about predicting the future. No Christian prophecy is about using the Laws of God to comment on the here and now. Prophets, friends, don't tell the future. No, prophets observe the present and the contrast between what they see with how God wants humanity to be. And most of the time, unfortunately, prophets find a stark contrast between the two.

Now, now, now more than ever, the world needs to hear from the Church of Jesus Christ. For far too long, we have hidden under the burden of shame, sometimes a rightly deserved burden of shame, for all the horrible things the Church has permitted or ignored — not in the name of Jesus, but in the name of power and money and stupid human honors. I admit and I confess the Church of Jesus Christ, of which I am a minister, has made terrible and sinful errors and I am truly sorry and ashamed of them.

Nonetheless, there is a difference, a vast difference, between the Jesus Christ who walked the earth and proclaimed a ministry of love and acceptance and the churches who claim to speak on his behalf which have done awful things in His name.

Right now, we need the Church, the True Church, the Church of the Bible, not the Church of denominations and hierarchies, and TV preachers, and hatred and cover-ups. The Church has to stand up and say in all truth and all correctness that the world is a very messed up place and the world is far, far, far, from what God wants it to be.

Today, today, today, all of us, women and men, slaves and free, straight and gay, black and white and every other race, regardless of nationality, regardless of politics — If we really are Christians, we have to stand united and cry out with one voice, ENOUGH! ENOUGH! ENOUGH!

Enough of the hatred! Enough of the killings! Enough of the destruction of the planet's environment! Enough of the horrible inequities of wealth! Enough of stupid wars! Enough of genocides! Enough of starvation when there is plenty of food! Enough of people dying from COVID, AIDS, Malaria, TB, and so many other diseases when we have the technology to cure them! Enough of Churches defending corrupt politicians and corrupt governments! Enough of men reducing women to non-humans and claiming superiority over them! Enough of White Supremacy! Enough of denying facts simply because it is inconvenient or painful!

Brothers and sisters in Christ. Pentecost is the time for prophecy from us, by us, to all of us because we are the slaves to Jesus. We are Jesus' slaves, bound and committed to share His Good News no matter what. And now we, we, we as few as we are, must stand up and speak. We must testify to the truth. We must, with firm reliance and trust in God, make Jesus' vision of a humanity rooted in equality and love come true.

That is our mission on this Pentecost Sunday. Let us make that mission our reality.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.