

## **Pentecost Day May 31 2020**

To even begin to stand here and preach on this Pentecost Sunday, in this pandemic year of 2020, seems like an impossible task. We have seen over the past week our nation's cities erupt in flames over the anger of the racist disparities in our criminal justice system that could so callously take the life of another African American man, this time it was George Floyd, brutally murdered on the street of Minneapolis. And the rage, the raw and seemingly unconsolable and unreasonable depth of rage, in reaction to this brutal murder, is so deep, so strong, we all wonder where this will end. Over the past few nights, we have seen dozens of American cities burn as those seeking justice for the killing of George Floyd have vented their anger in attacking the police, looting stores and running amok in feelings of helplessness and fear. As Dr. Martin Luther King said over half a century ago when similar uprisings hit our nation's cities in the middle of the 1960s, a "riot is the language of the unheard." Of course, the vast majority of those on the streets to protest George Floyd's murder, and the previous killings of many other African Americans at the hands of the police or racist vigilantes such as the father and son in Georgia, the McMichaels, are protesting peacefully, taking to the streets to demand an end to this system that allows such killings to take place. This is part of the terrible history of our nation with the legacy of racist discrimination that we now face again. Professor Stephen Carter of Yale Law School, also a novelist and a very faithful Episcopalian also, I might add, recently commented on this history when he said, "it's certainly a long history, and it's

certainly a hidden history. We're seeing more of it now. Because of the miracles of technology and social media, we see things that happened in the shadows before. But the truth is, sad though it is, that black people are killed by police at an alarming rate. In fact, one recent study tells us that black people have a five times greater chance per capita of being killed by police when unarmed. It's really quite remarkable data. And so this is simply the latest addition of this terrible, terrible tragedy.”

Prayer: Most merciful God, as we come before you in prayer this morning, coming to celebrate the gift of your Holy Spirit for your people, once again we seek your Word, a Word we need now more than ever. May we hear your Word and may our lives be both comforted and spurred to action through that Word to seek your truth and to establish your peace. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

Yes, it feels like an impossible task to preach at a time such as this, but it also feels more important than ever to reflect on our faith and to seek God’s help for the days and weeks to come. Some of the terrible history, as Professor Carter terms it, that we now face has been evident even before the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis Police. The coronavirus pandemic has laid bare the racial inequalities of our nation. Our communities of color, especially the African American community, but also the Latino community and the Native Americans, have been hit much harder by death and illness in this pandemic. Per capita, Native Americans, Blacks and Hispanics are dying and infected by Covid 19 at much higher rates than the white

community. I was troubled to learn this past Friday, that this is not only the case for the country as a whole, but even true for us here in the Green Mountain State, when Dr. Levine, our state health commissioner, stated that black Vermonters have died at a rate twice as high as white Vermonters.

Granted these are not larger numbers, because we have been very successful as a state at keeping the rates of infection at some of the lowest in the nation, and of course, our African American population is also one of the smallest in the nation, but still to realize that this racial disparity is also a local phenomenon was a bit of a shock to me, especially in the midst of the of the profound racial divide so dramatically made know in the murder of Goerge Floyd. So given even our own local situation, which while not as dire as some of the rest of our nation still shows the depth of racial inequality even with the backdrop of our stunning mountains and bucolic vistas, how are we called by God to act on this Pentecost Day, 2020?

This lesson from Acts, recounting the coming of the Holy Spirit as a rush of a mighty wind and divided tongues of fire on the gathered disciples is such a strange image to contemplate, especially this morning with the flames of riot still smoldering in may places throughout the United States. But that Holy Spirit, that image of these tongues of fire in Acts, also in its strange manifestation, might well show and shock and move us on this Pentecost Day to a deeper appreciation of God's loving kindness. The Biblical scholar Ched Myers examines the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts through the lens of the biblical story of the tower of Babel in the eleventh chapter Genesis.

The tower of Babel is the ancient story about the multiplicity of languages, that the one language of humanity was confused by God so that people would not strive to pass up God on their own. The story we hear from Acts about Pentecost is the opposite of this, as Ched Myers says, it is the anti-Babel, for despite the many languages, despite all the differences of those who hear the message from the disciples, still one message comes through, in the midst of the diversity of tongues, there is one meaning, about God's promise to us that the Spirit will free us, that no matter who we are, no matter where we have come from, our sons and daughters will prophesy, young men shall see visions and even the old will dream dreams, and this is to be the case even for the slaves, both men and women, they too will be showered in this Spirit and they too will be given this gift to prophesy as well. It is a vision of the power of God taking form in humanity, God's power animating our lives and it is a vision of God's Word speaking to us and forming us as those who will follow in God's way of love. This is the Holy Spirit bringing us to the fulness of God's power and lighting the fire of that power among God's people to carry on this mission of love. As Paul writes in the First Letter to the Corinthians, the Holy Spirit provides us many gifts, a diversity of gifts to serve in love, but most important is the unity we have in the Spirit. It is the by the power of the Spirit that though we are many, we are one body, brought together in the power of God's love, so that there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer female or male, no longer slave or free, because we are all made one by the power of the Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus.

Perhaps, if Dr. King was right, that a riot is the language of the unheard, that is the language we as Christians must seek to hear on this Pentecost. In the midst of the pandemic that has now claimed over 100,000 lives in our nation and that has led to many more deaths throughout the world, the fear, and the chaos that have been unleashed is getting more and more difficult to comprehend. The economic devastation is starting to take its toll as well; it will most likely be years, if not decades, for the disruption and poverty to be overcome, *(An alarm begins to ring; it is shut off and the preacher says, "I set this alarm at the beginning of the sermon to ring at 8 minutes and 46 seconds, because that is how long Officer Chauvin had his knee pressed down on George Floyd's neck, choking him and killing him. It is a long time, time to stop heart and end a life, and I could preach most of this sermon in that amount of time. It is just unconscionable that the police would act in this way." Then the preacher resumed the sermon.)* and the pain that we will live with will not quickly dissipate. So even now, vision we are called to prophesy, the dreams we are called to make known have at their base the never failing mercy of God, God's justice for all, that yes, Black lives matter, and the injustices that have plagued our African American sisters and brothers must now be taken seriously and overcome at all levels in our society, in each of our lives, and that equal treatment for all in our nation must be a sacred norm we put into practice immediately. For our African American sisters and brothers, for the Latino and Native American communities, our celebration of the coming of God's Holy Spirit this Pentecost is a call for a final and complete end to the

racial injustices of our land. This gift of the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit of love given to so graciously this day, this Pentecost, is a clarion call for God's justice and peace to reign fully in our land, that the fear of violence from the police, that the fear of unequal access to healthcare and economic wellbeing in the United States will be abolished, and that all will be heard and valued for their place in our nation. The coming of God's Holy Spirit means that no longer will a man be pinned to the ground and plead, "Please, I can't breathe," but the promise inscribed on the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor, "yearning to breathe free" will be our common aspiration and our common cause.

One of my mentors, the Rev. Barbara Crafton, a wise Episcopal priest who served in New York and New Jersey for many years wrote in an email yesterday that she, "came across a Tweet from someone named Michael Porter, Jr. I don't know of him, but he is apparently a well known basketball player for the Denver Nuggets. And this Tweet was apparently not well received. But its final words contain great truth for this week: "As much as you pray for George [Floyd] family, gotta also pray for the police officer(s) who were involved in this evil. As hard as it is, pray for them instead of hate them...Pray that God changes their hearts."

Therefore, she suggests this, which applies to everyone, also from the *Book of Common Prayer* (page 815) and the conclusion of this sermon for today. **For the Human Family**

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the

arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.