

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
May 31, 2020; Pentecost Sunday, Year A

SCRIPTURE READING

Acts 2:1-18

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² 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. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men [and women] of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ '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. ¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

SCRIPTURE READING

1 Corinthians 12:7-13

To each [of us] is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

SERMON

use your Words

Rev. Martin McGeachy

In our annual Pentecost reading, we hear of divided tongues of fire that appear among the disciples, resting on each of them, and that imagery feels different this year, watching news reports of cities on fire following incendiary reaction to the death of

African American George Floyd. For the last decade or so, on Pentecost Sunday, I do that reading accompanied by a cacophony of noise, voices, recordings of wind and such, to try to capture the descriptive narrative of the story. It's always so loud, by the end of the reading I'm usually shouting. Today, our country is shouting, so I decided to turn down the volume and just use the words.

I want to begin this morning by expressing my heartache over the racial injustice and violence that feels like divided tongues of fire raging in the burning rubber tire dump that is racism in our country, a fire that never goes out but flares up constantly. Some say that the images of Hell in the Bible, where the fire is never quenched, springs from a burning trash dump just outside of Jerusalem, filled with worms and disease, which never completely burned out. It's an appropriate image for the ethnic inequality in the United States, for while our country was founded on principles of freedom and equality, it was equally founded on the backs of enslaved Africans, and the appeasement of those founding fathers who never intended that equality be extended to the black race.

One of the curious aspects of the Pentecost reading is its lengthy list of nations gathered there that day, each hearing the Word of God in their own language. The list goes on and on, and when you have to read it out loud to a congregation, about halfway through it, your mind may have time to wander, or perhaps wonder, if maybe a good editor would have been in order? But no, let's think about that list—Galileans, 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—a list so oddly, specifically long to show us how far and widely reaching this Holy Spirit is—throughout the entire world, no matter from where, no matter your race or ethnicity (just imagine in that long list of countries the different skin shades, eye shapes, hair colors and cultures, along with their language of speech), each person hearing together, and understanding the Words speaking about God's deeds of power. The violent rush of wind, and the divisive tongues of fire preceded the coming of the Holy Spirit which empowered those who saw and listened. May the rush of violence and its divided tongues of fire precede a new understanding among us. May we not stay in fiery divide, but really hear, and really see what needs to be changed, and what we can do.

But we mustn't douse the fire of anger over injustice with the intent of "getting back to normal," and ignoring the smoldering embers, for they will erupt again. Let us use this moment to foment change. Violence is wrong; rioting is wrong; looting is wrong—but protesting is right, and anger over injustice is right, in fact a gift from God to propel us to address needed change.

Anger is frequently the manifestation of fear--fear of not getting what I want or losing what I have. African Americans are not getting the justice, the protection they deserve, and they have to be afraid of the very people who swear to serve and protect them. It's time to stop pretending that that's not true. A few years ago, based on the very same issues of brutality and murder against African Americans, a movement sprang up called "Black Lives Matter," which some resisted, saying, "Well, of course

they do. There's no need to single them out. All lives matter." That is a perspective that comes from a place of privilege in which one's family is not in daily danger of persecution. Certainly all lives matter, and that's the point. All lives matter, and Black lives are over and over and over killed and injured and oppressed in the way that White people never have to think about. I taught my daughters to call the police if they were in trouble. Black parents have to teach their children to fearfully avoid any action, word or look that might set off a powder keg of violence from law enforcement at any moment. It's no different from how 100 years ago, Black people were taught to avert their eyes from Whites, for they were beaten if their manner was perceived as "uppity." If we say all lives are equal, but overlook that some lives in our society are not worth saving, we're lying to ourselves. If in fact all lives matter, we MUST work to make sure that the oppression of Black lives ceases.

Many fear that even talking about this means we don't support the police—we absolutely do. We all understand that in volatile situations snap judgments must be made, and let us recognize that out of all the thousands of decisions being made by law enforcement every day, maybe most are good, but what do we do about the bad? I believe most of our police officers are good people doing their best and we must support them. Just as most Black men are good men who don't deserve being singled out for their skin color. I'm grateful for our peace officers and I pray for them. BUT unconscious racism exists. We must acknowledge it.

Can we get real? While our buildings are burning down, this might be a good time. All of us have bigotries, no matter our color. All of us. I took some classes in unconscious racism when I lived in Little Rock, and they weren't about trying to ferret out racism in others, but see our own. I remember the example by the teacher about how a parent walking down the street and holding the hand of a toddler, maybe tenses up a little, even without thought, when approaching a group of young Black men. Maybe that parent squeezes their child's hand a tiny bit. And a message is taught. Passed down through the generations.

I'm sure we've all seen reports of both police and ordinary citizens testing their responses to perceived threats at a gun range, where targets pop out, some innocent and some deadly, and everyone, without exception, fires more readily at the Black targets. For me, a humorous and yet humbling moment of racism was years ago when I had rented a snazzy convertible on vacation, and if you know me, you know I'm not snazzy. And I took my gal out to a fancy restaurant, and I had to gas up at a service station in a dicey part of town (lots of diversity, you know what I mean?). And I was nervous taking care of this really nice car. And as I filled the tank, I could see in the food mart inside that a couple of Black men were having a spirited conversation—the man at the register and a customer. Lots of arm waving and pointing at one another, and I began to fear, just a little, that as I walked in to pay, I was entering a fight in progress. And as I opened the door to the store, this is what I heard the customer say: "So anyway, then I had to run out and get milk for the baby." And the cashier replied, "I heard that. It's back their on aisle two. Have a nice day." Would I have been

trepidatious if they had been White, dressed in LLBean polos and khakis? For real, probably not.

If we really want to support our police, we have to acknowledge the system of unconscious and yes, sometimes conscious racism, and hold individuals accountable, and work to educate and change so that an officer is aware of his or her own racism, so that they can work through it, and so good cops don't make bad decisions that ruin others' lives and their own.

I hope we can use this moment of national pain to light a fire for change. But that doesn't mean I like it. This week Larry Kramer died. He was one of the founders of ACT Up, a movement in the 80's that promoted gay rights, but more than that, an awareness that gay men were dying of AIDS, and they were being ignored, blamed for their illness, and as a result, AIDS was spreading out of control. Larry Kramer was angry, controversial and confrontational, and I remember ACT UP. They used to interrupt our Presbyterian national General Assembly meetings when votes for gay equality didn't go their way. I didn't like them. They weren't nice. I preferred Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns, which protested in a kinder, gentler way, with what they called a ministry of presence, looking at the long arc of change, and getting gays and straights together to learn from one another. But Larry Kramer and ACT UP helped to propel things forward in a valuable way. I was struck when the founder of Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns, David Sindt, said that he believed one day the Presbyterian Church would ordain gays, but that he wouldn't live to see it. I said, "Really? You think it will take that long?" He said, "Yes, I have AIDS. I don't have that much time." He was right. He didn't live to see it. I love that Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." That gives me comfort and hope, and I believe that, but I sit in privilege. When one cannot be ordained and the vote once again says you are denied, and an affront to God, or when justice is tasing you for walking while Black, and your children are dying, work must be done. Act Up doesn't spring up because progress seems to be happening slowly; it erupts when progress seems not to be happening. When nothing happens and injustice continues unabated, volcanoes erupt. Dr. King also said, *"the riot is the language of the unheard."*

When I first began studying for the ministry a long time ago, my sister Liz pointed out that like most folks at the time, I referred to God and God's people with masculine pronouns, and that bothered her. As a woman, she felt left out. I used to teach English, and I was taught that "man," and "he," can be used inclusively; and of course, we all understand that God isn't a man, but "He" is called "Father" in the Bible. So I told Liz that she should lighten up. I said, "It doesn't bother me." Her reply was, "But it bothers me. Can't you make that change for me?" I decided that I could, for all who felt excluded by patriarchal language. Thank you to my sister for teaching me that language matters. Sometimes the way the Holy Spirit fills the apostles to be understood by the nations isn't by magic power, but when the apostles choose to speak the language that can be heard.

Today I'm wearing my rainbow tie, because it's almost Pride Month, and I'm proud of Gilead's efforts to be inclusive. Being welcoming is hard! Years ago, when Gilead had words with one another about this issue, some not loving, we chose to pretend the problem didn't exist, and in our vacillation continued to not welcome LGBTQ people into our midst, and then when the disagreement erupted again, it was like a volcano that had been building up pressure. Well, we eventually dealt with that figurative rioting and it subsided, but still, all the while we were not really looking at our language and actions honestly. Did that mean we were a bad church? No, we have always been a good church, a strong church, but we can always be better. And at one point, when we were talking about what a welcoming church we were, a woman said with trepidation, because who wants to be the one to speak out, "But are we?" And that led to some soul-searching that eventually led to changes, and a statement on our masthead that we welcome ALL—and a commitment to living into that. Just like my sister Liz, that woman is my sister in faith. Thank you to my sister.

It's great to have a sister you love to help guide your growth and perspective—well we do have sisters we love, and brothers; we have Black brothers who are being killed and oppressed, and it's time for change. It's time for all of us to use our words. Language Matters. Speaking out matters, and changing how we speak and act matters. You may not be in need of that change; you may in fact be bothered by the change, as I was at first in the matter of masculine pronouns, but it's okay to let ourselves be bothered, if our language of inclusivity and welcoming invites in those for whom our words, our pronouns, or our actions have been a stumbling block.

Use your words. The apostles were given language and words that all could understand—words of love. I'm not talking about just making nice; words of love aren't always sunshine and rainbows. We're taught to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), and speak out, speak up for justice. How do we do that, speak truth in love while being fired up for social change? The Spirit that burns within us is the Holy Spirit, and "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). We can be as fired up as we want as long as we're in that Spirit.

Finally, remember that not all Words come out of our mouths; they are in what we do and how we do it. I saw a terrific dance number on a TV show called "Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist" (NBC, s.1,ep.9) in which a deaf girl used sign language and movement to express her hurt and frustration, and it brought me to tears. I understood every bit of it, with no spoken language.

Friends, register to vote, and vote for the candidates of love, the ones unafraid to acknowledge and address mistakes, and the need for systemic change. Go to peace rallies, and if others turn to rage and violence, we have a choice. I heard a woman say that it's incorrect to speak of protesters and rioters as one group. Protesters protest. Rioters riot. They are two different things. Will we speak the words of aggression and destruction? Those are not Spirit words. Or will we use our **Words**—the **Word** that is Christ? We don't join in or condone mob violence, nor do we join in or condone police

violence. We use our words to calm, we use our words to pray, we use their words to listen and learn, confront our own bigotries, and we use our words to change ourselves first, and use our words to teach change. “Do not say peace, peace when there is no peace,” says Jeremiah 6:14. Create peace. Write plays about injustice, dance your anger, sing protest songs. Speak up when your neighbor says something ignorant. Speak to yourself about your ignorance. Speak out with silence, and listen with compassion. Speak up; ACT UP with Word.

For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—black or white, brown or tan, gay or straight, male, female, or transgender, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:4-13)

Amen.