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“Filled with the Spirit”

Who were watching the royal wedding this weekend? I admit, I looked at pictures and some videos. Of course, the wedding was beautiful. Chapel, splendid music, Megan’s charming and classy wedding dress, Oprah and other celebrities. The wedding, they said, was more like a celebrities get together, relaxed, and happy. I most of all enjoyed the sermon by Rev. Michael Bruce Curry, the presiding bishop of the American Episcopal Church. His sermon was on love, of course. He spoke about God’s love that can change and transform us and the whole world; how love can eliminate poverty and oppression; how love can stop violence and wars. How there is plenty of room for everyone with love. He spoke about love as fire that changed so much in the course of the human history. And I thought to myself, his sermon sounds very Pentecostal! Fire, transformation, God’s love!

Indeed, we celebrate Pentecost today. As United Methodists and many other Christian traditions, we call Pentecost “a birthday of the church.” Pentecost marks the day that is described in the Scripture that Sandy read for us this morning, in Acts 2. The day when the apostles and other disciples of Jesus were together in a room somewhere in Jerusalem and the Holy Spirit came upon them and they were able to communicate the message of God’s love to many nations. They spoke the native tongues of those people who were present there in the moment. How cool it would be if you all of a sudden speak Russian to me. What is really fascinating to me about the context of this passage is that the Holy Spirit came on the Jewish Holiday of Pentecost. Because it meant that the Jews from all nations in the world would gather in Jerusalem for this holiday.

You see, by the middle of the first century, there were probably more Jews living outside of the homeland, than actually live back in Judah proper. We call this phenomenon the Diaspora. The Diaspora is the dispersion of Jewish population out of their homeland and their settlement in other parts of the Globe. It happened when the exile to Babylon happened in 580s BC. But in the first century there were major Jewish communities in most of the large cities of the Roman Empire, all the way from the Persian Gulf on the east to Spain on the west. So, all the Jews from those regions came to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. This holiday is described in the book of Leviticus of the Hebrew Bible and has to do with the first fruits of the harvest and with giving of the Torah. Pentecost is celebrated on the fiftieth day after the Passover and can also be called Shavu’ot which means weeks from Hebrew. It has to do with the counting of the weeks prior to the holiday. The name Pentecost is a Greek name of the holiday and simply means “fiftieth day.”

So, at the time of the Second Temple, which was during Jesus’s time and right after his death, Shavuot or Pentecost was one of the major Jewish festivals, and the Jews from all over the world went to Jerusalem to make offerings and sacrifices to God. And it was so significant that the Jews in Diaspora were there on that day when the Spirit fell upon the community of first believers of Jesus. Because then, after hearing the message in their own native tongue, they took that message of Jesus’s love back to their homelands. They took the message of God’s love to their local contexts, where they lived, worked, studied, raised families.

Pentecost was about proclamation of God’s mighty deeds to people of all nations under heaven. It was about spreading the message of God’s love to the whole world. It was about the hope of the Resurrection of Jesus. It was about transforming the world with God’s love. And all of it was empowered by the Holy Spirit who was and is working in the world.

Because as then and now our world needs love. Our world needs the message of God’s love, the world where we discuss how could a biracial woman marry into a royal family. Our world needs the message of God’s love, the world where we judge each other by our appearances, our status, our race and our culture. Our world needs the message of God’s love, the world where teenagers kill each other with guns.

Of course, many of you heard about the shooting at Santa Fe High School, Texas. 10 people died including a teacher and a retired police office and 10 people were wounded. And all this tragedy happened on a Friday morning where kids joyfully went to school. They did what the kids and teenagers do, poke around, laugh. It was a nice weather in Texas that morning, 70s. And then the horror happened. I looked at the website that is gathering information about the victims. The teenagers’ pictures look so beautiful. The descriptions below each picture said some great things about them. They were all wonderful kids. All of them had bright futures before them. One girl grabbed my eye’s attention more than others. Her name is Sabika. She was from Pakistan. She came to the US as an exchange student and studied at Sante Fe High School. All her family is in Pakistan. They tried to reach her by calls and texts on that morning when they heard about the shooting but she did not respond. They knew then that they lost their daughter and sister. The US ambassador to Pakistan expressed their condolences to the family. And said that Sabika was thinking big for her age, very bright and talented, a youth ambassador, “a bridge between our peoples and cultures.” I cannot start to fathom what it means to lose a child. But I cannot even imagine what it means or how it feels to send your child into the most wonderful country in the world the most developed with many opportunities and to receive the news that your child was killed in a school shooting. We pray for the victims, we pray for the situation, and we pray for the gun violence to stop.

So, what is the message of Pentecost for us today in the face of tragedy like that? What does Pentecost mean for us and for the world? Does it make any difference? Is it just another church holiday? What does it mean that the Spirit of God was given to the first followers of Christ and that same Spirit continues to be with us today?

The meaning and the message of Pentecost two thousand years ago and now is the same. The ultimate goal of Pentecost was to spread the Gospel, to share it with the rest of the world so that the life-giving, life-changing love of Jesus can reach the hearts of the people everywhere, from different cultures, different backgrounds, languages, genders, to all without exclusion. So that the world can be transformed. So the violence can be no more. So the war can be no more. So school shootings can be no more.

And my friends, we are to do it. That is why the Holy Spirit came so that we become partners with God in this sharing of Christ’s love with everyone. One scholar said that yes, we have preachers at the pulpit. But the ultimate preacher is the church. We are filled with the Holy Spirit. We are given a gift of God’s power and glory with us. And so we, the church, are to preach the Gospel. God worked through the disciples and the Jews of the first century and God is working through us so that the message of love can be communicated to the world.

Just like the Diaspora Jews of the first century, who received the message of Jesus’s love and went to the places where they lived to share that love, we will go from here, to places where we live, work, study, raise families. We can bring the message of Jesus’ love to where we are at, our local context. A pastor of a local church near the high school where the shooting occurred, said, “We’re just opening the doors to anyone who might need some love.” And my friends, I think our world needs some love. The world needs the message of life-giving and transforming love of God. The tag on the mission statement of our church states, sharing Christ’s love with everyone. Share Christ’s love with everyone, no matter where they came from. No matter how they look. No matter how they speak. Share the love.

And it looks very different for all of us. It could be words and it could be actions. It could be educating people. It could be having honest and hard conversations about race, violence and injustice in the world. It could be calling your local representative and asking to do something about gun violence and gun control. It could be pouring love on our children and begin there when they are young. It could be taking your children to a food pantry or a free store and teach them about poverty in the local community and how we can do something about it. No matter how you do it, share the love of Jesus.

That spirit fallen with a loud sound on the disciples of Jesus, and they were ready to carry the story of their Lord to the world. My beloved friends, today is another Pentecost, another time that we can renew our faith and our spirits so we can continue to carry the story of Jesus, so we can continue to share the love of God to the world. Because the world desperately needs it.That is why today we will be coming to God one more time in prayer. To be renewed in the spirit, to receive consolation and peace, but also receive the power from up high to be reassured to continue in our walk of faith.