

May 20, 2018
Pentecost Sunday
Romans 8:22-27 (Year B)
Lutheran Church of Our Father, Greensboro, NC

I've always loved Pentecost. It's a festival Sunday, which is always fun. We shout Alleluia and keep the resurrection joy at the forefront for this final Easter day. And it's a red-colored Sunday, which always means something special is going on. We've got streamers, and banners, and processions. We tell an exciting story about fire and rushing wind. We incorporate different languages in worship. We call it "the birthday of the church" and sometimes there's even cake afterwards.

I've always loved Pentecost. But if I'm being honest, I've had a hard time gearing up for it this year. Usually it's a blessed and joyous festival that focuses on the outpouring of God's Spirit. The Spirit which allows each to hear and understand the disciples' proclamation in their own language. The Spirit of peace and unity. But this year I just haven't felt up for it.

I don't know about you, but my week hasn't felt like peace and unity. Instead as the week has worn on it's been filled with more and more violence and division. It started on Monday, when 60 Palestinian protestors were killed at the Gaza border and thousands were injured in bloodiest day for Palestinians in years. 60 people who were among a crowd of protestors that was open fired upon because of fear of an attack. 60 humans, dead. And so my heart breaks.

But it's the Middle East, and nothing is simple. And so while I grieve the violence and the death, I am also bombarded with the context. And I am told that Hamas had people in the crowd with bombs. And I'm also told that at least six of those killed were non-violent children. And these people think that Israel defended themselves justifiably. And these people think it was a massacre. And I get on Facebook and everyone is yelling.

And I remember that 60 lost lives is the tip of the iceberg in this conflict, that has raged since before any of us were born and seems like it will rage long after we are all dead. And so I grieve. And I am angry. And I do not feel like celebrating the Spirit.

And then we get to Friday, and I've gotten to sleep in, and I'm lazily sitting on the couch when Lindsay looks up from her phone and says "there's been another school shooting." Another. School. Shooting. It's in Texas. Ten people are dead. And my heart breaks.

But it's gun violence in America, and nothing is simple. And so while I grieve the violence and the death, I am also bombarded with the context. And I am told that there have been 22 shootings at schools in 2018 where someone was killed or injured. And I'm also told that tightening gun ownership won't solve anything, and there are plenty of illegal ways for criminals to find guns. And these people think guns are the problem. And these people think guns aren't the problem. And I get on Facebook and everyone is yelling.

And I remember that I have had to preach on school shootings too many times in my few years of preaching. And so I grieve. And I am angry. And I do not feel like celebrating the Spirit.

And all the while I've had the necessity of writing a sermon hanging over me. And I don't know what to say. I feel like I've said it all before. And I feel like saying things doesn't do anything anyway. I feel like I should do something. But I don't know what to do. And I kinda feel like doing things doesn't really do anything anyway either. I'm just lost. And angry. And tired.

And so I don't really feel like celebrating Pentecost. I don't know that I have the heart to rejoice in the Spirit that dances on every head so that all people might be united. I don't know that I have the heart to delight in the Spirit that turns every tongue so that what divides us won't get in the way of proclaiming who God is.

And yet, I believe that even when I cannot bring myself to delight in God's Spirit, God's Spirit draws near to me, draws near to us. I believe that when we gather in this place, no matter our mood or our eagerness, God is present. When we worship, God listens. And if we have praises to sing or laments to bring, God stirs. And every time – *every time* – God has a Word for us. And that is most certainly true on this Pentecost Sunday.

Hear again what Paul says in his letter to the Romans. Paul writes, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves – we who have the first fruits of the Spirit – groan inwardly while we wait; while we wait for redemption. For in hope we were saved. And hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

Yes. Yes, Lord. This is our God. This is what our God does. God says, “I know that it is hard. I know that it feels like everything is falling apart. I know you that your heart is broken, and you are angry, and you do not know what to do. But I am here. I am here in your weakness. I am here in your anger. I am here in your broken-heart. And when you don't even know how to pray, I'll pray for you. I'll hold you.”

These are God's promises to us. And I don't know about you, but they are promises that I desperately need. Because when I look around at the world it doesn't feel like birth pangs to me. It doesn't feel like something new, and wondrous, and beautiful is being born. It just feels like regular old pain and suffering. It just feels like senseless violence and endless war and unreconcilable partisanship and divisiveness.

And yet we cling to hope. Because in hope we were saved. Things looked mighty dark when Jesus was laid in the tomb, and yet hope remained. Christ's death was not the end. Rather, it became a new beginning. The very real pain and suffering that was felt by Christ and those who loved him surely did not feel like birth pangs. And yet, they were, as Christ's death leads to Christ's resurrection. And as Christ was raised and lived again so all who are in Christ have been raised. The Spirit has tied us to Christ. It has formed us into his Body.

And so the world is not dying. The world is not lost. It is not forsaken. It is not hopeless. Rather even when we are overcome with the weight of it all, God's Spirit intercedes, with sighs too deep for words.

God's Spirit has been poured out on the world. It is poured out in healing love on the victims of violence. It is poured out in comforting love on the families of those who've been killed. It is poured out in reforming love on the perpetrators of this violence. It is poured out on

the people who we love. It is poured out on the people who we struggle to love. It is poured out on all of us gathered here. It is poured out on you.

And if there is a hope for peace and unity, in our world, in our country, and in our lives, it is in God. Our hope is not found in our political parties. It is not found in guns. It is not found in laws.

It is found here. It is found here in this room. Where we gather to be united. Where we practice the love of God with one another. Where we share Christ's peace, even with people we don't agree with.

It is found here in this font. Where we are called to come and be washed. Where we are given our identity as beloved. Where we are knit into an inseparable Body.

It is found here on this Table. Where we receive the body and blood of our crucified and risen Lord. Where we are given this meal that strengthens, sustains, and sends us. Where we encounter Christ, in our hands and in our bodies.

We have a great hope. And that hope is in God. And so I believe however it is that we arrive at peace and unity, it will be through the work of God. And with people faithfully discerning the heart and will of God and courageously carrying it out on the earth. It will be through the strength of Jesus Christ in us, and it will be energized by the fire of the Spirit.

And the day is surely coming. Even if today we might be struggling to hold onto that hope. The day is surely coming. Whether we have the heart to delight in the Spirit today or not. The Spirit is here, interceding for us, with sighs too deep for words. Thanks be to God for that. Amen.