

Sermon on Acts 2:1-21, John 20:19-23
Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends, grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. ...

Well, this has certainly been an amazing week that we'll never forget, in this most unforgettable year of all years! It started out rather well, on the Feast of the Ascension last Sunday, the feast celebrating our Lord Jesus ascending into heaven, and the mission he gave to his followers to be his witnesses to the world. More about that mission as it is given to us, will come later. But maybe even more memorable was how beautiful a day it became, with the sun shining that Memorial Day weekend, after months of being cooped up indoors in Covid Quarantine. Up to that day, the coronavirus pandemic has been the world-changing story of 2020. What could be worse than 100,000 deaths in America in just a few months, forced physical separation, schools closing and public worship cancelled in churches?

Then came Monday, the day on which our Twin Cities world may be changed forever – a Memorial Day we won't forget, without traditional cemetery ceremonies because of the coronavirus. On an overcast afternoon, an African American man, who worked as a security bouncer at a Minneapolis club, was arrested outside a south Minneapolis shop on a minor infraction, possibly passing a bad currency, we don't know. Police were called, and they took George Floyd across the street, to arrest him. George did not resist. Three police officers subdued him on the ground, one with a knee on his neck, while another stood on the sidewalk to keep onlookers away. We all have seen what happened, because of the videos recorded by witnesses. He pleaded with police, "*I can't breathe.*" The officer didn't let up, and held him for over eight minutes. When the ambulance came, George Lloyd had no pulse, no breath of life, and was pronounced dead at the hospital. That night the protests began, and the grieving, which grew every day and night, and came to a head Thursday night, when the Third Precinct police headquarters was burned to the ground, along with many other businesses in Minneapolis and St. Paul. The National Guard has been called out, and curfews were put in place across the Twin Cities – which seem to have been ignored in Minneapolis. Protests against police violence against African Americans have now spread across the country, mixed with political extremists and white terrorist agendas that also exist. We don't know where all this is heading, as we have never experienced anything like this before. Fires continued to burn and smolder over night Friday, despite the curfew – they even got worse. Until Saturday night, when more troops were called out, and protesters were forcibly removed from the streets by the Fifth Precinct. As we gather this morning, the ending is not yet clear.

So this is not a traditional Pentecost Sunday, celebrating baptism with processional banners and choirs singing praises. But some of the imagery of the day syncs quite closely to the first Pentecost in scripture. Like in the book of Acts, we have been sequestered in our homes, sheltered inside for two months, under curfew for two nights, just now able to come out into the street for Pentecost. But our fears are from the coronavirus, and the threat of racist extremists from out of state. But there is that other fear of racial prejudice, the threat of violence that has hung over the heads of people of color for generations, the daily oppression by police, and unequal access to education, housing, jobs or health care.

Today we read in scripture that traditional Pentecost imagery in the “rush of a violent wind” bringing the power of the Holy Spirit, like flames of fire on the disciples’ heads. On our television screens (or in person), we have seen this week an apartment building burned down, many stores, and the Minneapolis police 3rd precinct destroyed, flames shooting into the night sky, and clouds of smoke and tear gas flying across 31st and Nicollet, or the Peace Bridge on Lake Street and Marshall . Fire and smoke. People’s livelihoods going up in smoke, along with their dreams for the future. But still we hear Peter’s sermon quote the prophet Joel how “*you sons and daughters shall prophesy and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams.*” Everyone has dreams for the future – but so often racism has quashed the dreams of young and old alike, like a knee on a man’s neck. The anger and pain in the demonstrations following George Floyd’s murder cried out in the lament of broken dreams, and lives senselessly cut short. So the prophet declared how God would show “*portents in the heaven above and sings on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist... ..sun to darkness and the moon to blood...before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day...when everyone who calls on the Lord shall be saved.*” Is that what it will take before the dream of equality – even survival - would be fulfilled?

So we find ourselves confused, because the issues are complicated, not clear cut. The murder of George Floyd was clear and caught on video, but the issues that have evolved are not. Because the protests that started over one black man’s wrongful, tragic death morphed into racism in the Minneapolis police force, and demonstrators also included those who simply wanted to burn buildings, loot stores and cause social upheaval – most of them young, white men. We find ourselves living in the tension of two seemingly contradictory truths both being true at the same time. It’s called a paradox. Lutherans call it *simil justus et peccator* (which means we humans are at the same time sinners and saints!). For there is righteous anger and pain of people too long oppressed, demeaned and ignored – so much that we cannot look away, we must listen and hear! – now bubbling over in grief and anger over the senseless murder of George Floyd, so much like the senseless murders of thousands of black and brown men over the years, which we never saw.

But it is also true that there are evil, organized forces of white supremacy with their very different agendas in the same protests, using the righteous anger of others as a cover to sow destruction, chaos, burning and terror to suit their own purposes. Both exist here: righteous anger shouting against evil and racism, and evil being used to destroy and divert us from any resolution, to keep us from finding the justice that leads to healing and a new Beloved Community together! So once again the dream is in danger of being lost. But the evil is exposed.

So what shall we do about all of this? We are people of faith, who speak about love. We have to do something, brothers and sisters, because now that we have heard and seen the cost of racism for human beings, with our own eyes, our life as people of faith in this city can never be the same. Like the prophet cries out for *“peace, peace, when there is no peace!”* There can be no peace without justice. But how can we achieve justice, and so find that peace? What can we do?

First the violence has to stop. Next, we must see these things clearly, and realize the part we play because of our privilege to look away, how we have helped allow them to happen by our ignorance and inattention. We can no longer look away, or ignore the problem. Then we must repent – not just say a meaningless “I’m sorry”, but say the words that we have ignored our brothers and sisters’ pain – for 400 years since this nation began. With repentance comes the hard work of continued listening to those who continue to suffer, to examine and understand in a deeper way our complicity and how you and I benefit. Then there is more work to do in tearing down the systems of oppression, in our criminal justice system, in education, in our economic system that keeps so many from living the abundant life that God has promised, which are realized only by a few. This is the work of a generation – some of us have been seeking to make that change happen all our adult lives, with little success – but now the oppression could be at a breaking point, so there is a chance to change everything. If we work for it, keep at it, and if we get some breaks along the way. If we survive the COVID-19 pandemic, if we avoid this race war that some seem to want to desperately, and if enough leaders rise up from the ashes of these flames of passion with the vision to repair the breach and put new pieces of democracy together, for the common good (and not out of greed). I believe that they are already here – that is my hope.

In the meantime, there is immediate work that all of us are called to do, to work for justice, offer compassion, and care for our neighbors – using the gifts that God has given you and me, through the Holy Spirit. Some of that work is already being done – most of us all stayed home last night, out of the way when curfew was called by our Governor. It started Thursday morning, when neighbors came outside to see the destruction caused by riots and looting in the Midway neighborhood, and started cleaning up. It continued with donations of food brought to Bethlehem on the Midway Lutheran and Hamline United Methodist

Church in St. Paul, to Holy Trinity and Calvary Lutheran Churches in South Minneapolis and to the North Side community, because their local grocery stores were destroyed overnight. The immediate problem is how do people get food, diapers, prescriptions and other necessary items when Target, Aldis, and Lloyd's Pharmacy were burned down or stand empty? How do you get around when the Light Rail is closed and the MTC doesn't run?

On Thursday, the day I picked up 30 face masks that Todd-Allen Hamilton had made and donated to us, the Midway Target was looted, Aldis was closed, businesses burned, and Todd Allen had nowhere that he could walk to even buy dog food for his dogs! In the long run, those things can be solved, but in the short run, people need help getting food. You can help with that – with food donations, and other supplies. You can bring them to Bethlehem on the Midway at 436 Roy St. North – or just help clean-up their church. Or you can make a financial donation to the Minnesota Freedom Fund.

Regarding the bigger issue, you and I must educate ourselves about the mischief and evil racism has done in Minnesota, bringing injustice and great harm to African Americans, Asian, and Latinx people – human beings who do not deserve to be treated so unjustly. We have to understand how it is that a police officer can put a subdued African American man in handcuffs on the ground, and put his knee on his neck for 8 minutes and 36 seconds. We have to learn how to listen to our brothers and sisters who have different life experiences than us, who experience so much pain and loss. Then determine how to change the systems that dehumanize us, or make us consider others less than human. We need God's help to build that Beloved Community where every human life counts.

I don't know how this all ends – in fact, I don't even know how to end this sermon! We have a lot of work to do! But our hope lies in this: that God is with us through all the challenges, the loss, the joys and the pain. In the gospel, we hear how the disciples were gathered in fear that first Easter evening, behind locked doors, like us in curfew. Then Jesus came and stood among them, saying "*Peace be with you.*" He breathed on them, saying "*Receive the Holy Spirit, and if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.*"

So there you have it. Speaking peace in the name of the Lord. Forgiving one another's sins, so that we do not hold that sin anymore. We must come through the fire *refined, not burned!* That's how we shall be released from our captivity to sin, racism and fear, free to live as God intends, with love for one another, love for our neighbor, love even for our enemies. That will surely be a great and glorious day, when everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Reconciled by fire as one Beloved Community. Thanks be to God! Amen.