

Sermon on John 20:19-23, Acts 2:1-21
Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ...

Both today's gospel from John and the story of Pentecost from Acts start out inside a room in Jerusalem. In John's gospel, it was Easter evening, where the disciples were hiding behind locked doors, out of fear of the Jewish authorities, who were seeking to arrest them lest they spread news that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead. Had he, they wondered? They hadn't seen him yet – only Mary had seen him, in the garden, and they weren't really sure of it yet. Perhaps in her grief she had imagined it. So they sat there in fear and bewilderment, waiting for what might happen next.

That evening Jesus himself appeared suddenly among them, saying "Peace be with you!" They rejoiced when they saw the Lord, risen from the dead. Then Jesus said they he had come to send them out, as the Father had sent him. Then he breathed on them, and said, "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*" So now we read this lesson on Pentecost, to emphasize the gift of the Holy Spirit which the disciples had now received, in the first appearance of the risen Jesus to them. Jesus connected this gift to what we call "the office of the keys" – the calling for the church to forgive sins in his name. But today, we might connect these "keys" to the "unlocking of the doors" behind which the disciples were hiding! Jesus exhorted his followers to *come out of the house* to share the good news that Jesus was now risen from the dead, and that the love of God and forgiveness of sins was to be proclaimed "out in the world!" That's not "fake news" – that's "good news"!

In our first lesson from Acts, we see the disciples once again behind closed doors, in another house in Jerusalem, fifty days after Easter. It was the annual spring harvest festival called *Shavuot*, the feast of the gift of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Jerusalem was filled with devout Jews from all over the Mediterranean world, speaking all the languages known in those days – Luke says that they *were living in Jerusalem* – which meant that they were immigrants! Jerusalem was a city filled with residents who had come to live from every nation in the surrounding region. The disciples were waiting with great anticipation, because Jesus had told them to. All of a sudden they heard a noise like the sound of a mighty wind, which filled the whole house. And the wind gave them each the ability to speak languages they had never studied – it was the Holy Spirit which Jesus had promised! Once again, *the Spirit sent them out* into the streets of Jerusalem, to share the good news of God in every language known to the world.

Maybe you have figured out where I am going with this. Sometimes we in the Church come to places like this, sanctuaries where we worship God inside, and expect that *this* is where we will find God. Not that God isn't here – we know from scripture that God is present through Jesus Christ wherever two or three are gathered in his name. But we know that no one can control the Holy Spirit or confine the Spirit inside one room – for the Spirit is like a mighty wind that blows where it wills. We also know that St. Paul, the city where we live today, is a place where people from almost every known nation live. I believe that there are eighty different languages spoken in the St. Paul Public School system. Within a few miles of this church we have people from Europe, Asia, Africa, North and South America in origin, devout Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and other faiths as well. There are Hmong, Laotians, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Thai, Karen, Burmese and Japanese, Chinese and Korean languages spoken here along University Avenue. We also have immigrants from Europe who speak Russian, French, Polish, German, Czech, Italian, Norwegian, Swedish, Finish, and a host of Eastern European languages. We also hear Swahili, Arabic, Egyptian and countless dialects from Africa, not to mention Spanish, Portuguese, English, and many languages of indigenous peoples and Native Americans, especially Ojibwe and Dakota, from the north and the south. We truly have another Pentecost situation as our context here in St. Paul!

And what would God have us do with our context today? We could say that we should do what comes naturally: come inside to worship in our own language with people whom we know and understand, and invite others to come on in and join us, *as long as they learn our language (English) and our hymns and worship traditions*. We haven't figured out that the Spirit comes to send us outside, to meet people where they are, to tell them the good news of God's love for all God's children, God's compassion for everyone who suffers, God's welcome to the immigrant as well as the outcast sinner, and God's passion for justice for the oppressed. Homeless Syrians are just as welcome as wealthy Europeans!

Oh, perhaps we forgot, but did we tell God that we are often afraid to go outside with the good news? Perhaps we don't believe it strongly enough, or haven't experienced it ourselves, or are too self-conscious to speak of faith out loud. So we stay comfortably inside, to worship God in our pews, surrounded by familiar people that we know almost too well, and by familiar stained glass windows. Maybe like the disciples we have locked ourselves inside our churches because we are afraid of the people outside, or what may happen when we bring our faith out into the open. If it were up to us, we might just live the rest of our Christian lives in here, comfortably Lutheran, without stretching out our hands to anyone who is new or different.

That would be so unfortunate and so contrary to the gospel! But fortunately, we have Jesus as Lord who always stretches our boundaries and pushes us to interact with others who are different than us. We also have the gift of the Spirit, who promises to fill us with faith, and blows us outside if we let the Spirit do its work! This is not to say that we can no longer come inside. It just means that we can't become all that we can be as God's children by staying here, and keeping our faith inside a Church, or inside ourselves. Faith, just like love, is meant to be shared with others. Not to manipulate or debate, but rather to interact with others out of love and service, to show love for God and neighbor.

Now, there is a lot that we are afraid of these days, in 2017. Sometimes it comes from politicians and elected leaders who try to manipulate us by telling us how much we have to fear from others who are different. They encourage us to long for the "good old days" which must have been better because they were more comfortable, and we could surround ourselves with people who looked and thought like us. But fortunately, this is not possible in today's world, and we can overcome those forces that would make us afraid by embracing the people who are "out there" who are "different", and welcome guests and visitors.

Though incidents of violence and terror throughout the world may cause fear, such as what happened recently in Manchester and London, England, they also show us how we are connected. Last Wednesday 90 innocent people were killed by a suicide bomb in Kabul, Afghanistan, and 400 were injured, as they went about their business. We could withdraw in fear, back inside our rooms. But we discover that one of those killed is the brother of Ehsan, who lives with Reva (who is on our Vestry). And Ehsan learned of his brother's death right mowing the grass on Redeemer's lawn last Wednesday afternoon. Yes, we are connected. And we cannot withdraw in fear. Either we lock ourselves in our rooms, or go outside into the light with good news!

Over recent years we have found that the Spirit is moving among us – perhaps not like a "might, noisy wind", but imperceptibly quiet, changing us and moving us, bit by bit. It's nothing to be afraid of! We have learned to love and care for those who have come to be part of this community of faith, whether they came by invitation, came along as a friend, or just "dropped in". Today we baptize the infant son of Obang Agwa and Ariet Oman, who came as immigrants from the border of Sudan, Kenya and Ethiopia. Each Sunday we have several Christian congregations worshipping here – one where they worship in Spanish on Saturday mornings and have come from El Salvador, Mexico, and other Central American nations. One worships in Hmong, at noon on Sundays, in this room. Another is comprised of mostly Africans from Tanzania, who worship in English, but also sing hymns and songs in Swahili. In about a week, we will also have guests sleeping in many of our rooms, high school youth from churches throughout the

Midwest, who have come to serve the people of this community. We welcome them like reinforcements who share in our ministry here. They will sleep inside at night, and go out into the daylight with love.

In recent weeks some of us were “blown by the Spirit” over to the State Capitol, to seek to move legislators in a legislative process that seems more concerned with budgets, tax breaks and political power than the common good of the people. So we went to talk to legislators, to demonstrate, to preach, to sing, and to pray along with immigrants, people of color, some who spoke Spanish or other languages. Some even slept in the Governor’s reception room, hoping to meet with the Governor. I welcome these periodic trips to the Capitol with Isaiah, whether it’s to witness to gun violence, health care for everyone, equitable wages and benefits, or drivers licenses for immigrants. On the last day of the special session I met my own representative, who told me how he was moved by the presence of so many people of faith, so that he gave a speech from the House floor where he told of his values for the common good. Do you think we have no influence for good, people of faith?

Which is, ironically, the purpose for the gifts of the Spirit. In our reading from 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul wrote *“to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit FOR THE COMMON GOOD.”* Whether the gift is faith, or speaking wisdom or knowledge, or faith, or gifts of healing or the working of miracles, it is for the purpose of benefitting the whole community. Because the whole body is one, whether we are Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.

The key to the gift of the Spirit is how the Spirit helps us to break out of our boxes inside churches or ourselves, unlock the doors that shut others out or keep us inside, and give us peace in Christ, faith and courage to go outside. Without the Spirit, the disciples might have stayed inside, locked within their “safe house” forever. But with the Spirit they became bold witnesses to the good news of God in Christ Jesus, for the good of the world! We might stay inside, too. But with the Spirit’s help, we are empowered for ministry that breaks through those old barriers of ethnicity, sex, gender, class, and ability which keep us divided. Today it is so critically important that we of the Church express our faith in a message that counteracts the fear and vision in this world, and proclaims equity, freedom, and what binds us together as one. All of this for the common good, in response to God’s call, who sent Jesus, sent his disciples, and now calls us to proclaim the good news of faith, hope, and love in the name of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God for the gift of the Spirit, who promises to empower us to act for the good of all God’s children, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

My friends: I have some bad news.

Ramatullah Haseeb Nasiry was killed by a suicide truck bombing attack in Kabul, Afghanistan last Wednesday. A total of 90 were killed, and 400 injured.

Ramatullah is the second brother of Ehsanullah Nasiry, who is an Afghan student living with Reva Rasmussen, his host. Ehsan learned of his brother's death after mowing Redeemer's lawn on Wednesday. Our prayers go out to Ehsan, his family, and all who lost loved ones in this tragedy.

For the family of Ramatullah Haseeb Nasiry, brother of Ehsan, who was killed by a suicide bomb in Kabul, Afghanistan, and all those senselessly killed by terrorism in Manchester and London. Comfort every family as they mourn they dead, and give strength to those who come to the aid of the injured. Bring peace to our world, end fear and hate, and make us witnesses to love and reconciliation with all our neighbors. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**