

John 20: 19-23
June 4, 2017
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Pentecost Sunday

In the gospel of John there is no rush of a mighty wind. There are no tongues of flame. There is no explosion of the one message of grace into the languages of the known world. That is the extrovert's Pentecost. As someone who is at least as introverted as he is extroverted I have felt defeated by the need to be sent out to the world to proclaim the message to the world in this same excited and energized fashion. I compare my level of passion and focus and need to share the gospel with the disciples of old and I feel like someone who is just going through the motions of being a Christian.

Of course this is a distorted picture of the Pentecost presented by Luke in the book of Acts. In the *true* story the gift of the Holy Spirit is just that—a *gift*. The disciples are vessels holding a powerful message. No one thinks that there is anything special about these mostly illiterate fishermen, former tax collectors and people of unknown origin. To the extent that the disciples are taken into account at all it is because there is such a contrast between the *extraordinary* message and the very *ordinary* messengers.

How did we get to the idea that somehow we are meant to be as extraordinary as the extraordinary message? Trying to reproduce what happened in the book of Acts is not only impossible—it is exhausting and self-defeating. To try to sustain this energy week after week is to alienate ourselves from the true source of our witness. We are not meant to be extraordinary exemplars of the life and message of Jesus. *We are meant simply to be ordinary people gifted with an extraordinary message.* That message is given by God to us in order to be mediated

through our ordinary lives, our particular personalities and histories. In short, it is our very ordinariness that makes our message visible. It is the earthiness of our routines and loves, our simple acts of kindness and compassion. It is our willingness to be content to be what the apostle Paul calls simple clay pots that makes the power of the good news of Jesus by the Holy Spirit to be experienced by our neighbors and friends. Sometimes this extraordinary message is most evident when we make mistakes, speak out of turn and witness to our flawed characters. That is why Jesus places such a high value on repentance and seeking forgiveness. Repenting and seeking forgiveness means admitting that we are not Jesus. It is how people experience the grace of Christ. Indeed, it is our acceptance of our own ordinariness that allows us to be stunned by the amazing gift of knowing that we are God's beloved children and have found our true place in the scheme of the universe. This is the peace which Jesus says is his peace which the world cannot give.

So it is that I am so thankful for what some scholars call the Pentecost of John. I call it the introvert's Pentecost; or, more poetically, the gentle Pentecost.

In John's account, the disciples have closed themselves off from the world. They have locked the doors. They are afraid that the people who crucified Jesus will now come for them. There is no evidence of a mass round-up of followers of Jesus after his death. The Romans and the Jewish leaders who had sought Jesus' death assumed that once the shepherd was eliminated the sheep would scatter. The very scene of fearful disciples in a locked room seems to validate the assumption. Today we might call this a bunker mentality or a state of feeling besieged. For these disciples the world has become a hostile and unforgiving place. Without the person of Jesus how are they to stand up to an unbelieving world?

Notice as well that they have locked themselves away in fear *despite* the news that the tomb is empty and *despite* the witness of Mary that Jesus has appeared to her. How well Mark captures this in his Easter announcement to the women disciples, “He has risen. He is not here!” And so it is with us ordinary people: we have inherited the announcement that Jesus is risen; but in our ordinary everyday experience, often, *he is not here*.

Because this is a free country we do not have to lock our doors out of fear of arrest. Yet on the inside we often feel at a loss. It is not so much that the world is hostile to the message of Jesus. People are more inclined to dismiss the message of Jesus as irrelevant. People who go to church and support communities of faith are dismissed as at best well-meaning and somewhat soft-headed or at worst as dangerous demagogues who use their beliefs to destroy the lives of others in the name of God. Many of our own children are following paths that don’t center around coming together around hearing the good news. What are we to do? Has the world grown beyond Christianity? Are we a living museum of ancient beliefs? What are we doing wrong? Maybe worship should be more exciting and we should be more on fire for Jesus! Ah yes... there it is, the seductive belief in the force of being strong, dynamic and—of course absolutely certain of our beliefs.

Yet on the day that John recounts, the doors are locked and yet quietly Jesus appears. Take a moment and join the disciples in the room. Can you detect a transformation of the silence? Can you sense the change from an atmosphere of agitation and fear to a quiet calm, spreading among them, enveloping them and warming them from the inside out? I imagine this calm beginning even before Jesus says the words, “Peace be with you.”

The word “peace” ultimately comes from the Hebrew word, “shalom” which means the experience of life properly ordered the way God designed it. One with God we are one with each other, one with the earth and one within ourselves. It is the peace that passes all understanding. It is the peace the world cannot give. It is, moreover, the peace that cannot be achieved by being strong, dynamic and certain. It is a peace that that cannot be achieved by right beliefs or attitudes. Instead it is the peace which Elijah experienced as the still small voice. It is the quiet presence of Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet. It is the “silence of eternity interpreted by love” so wonderfully expressed by John Greenleaf Whittier.

In John’s Pentecost the great wind of the Spirit comes in the soft, sweet and tender breath of Jesus. It is as if he is saying, *“This is the true gift of the Holy Spirit. It is this state of being so still in the Lord, so deeply and wordlessly connected that as the breath of God sent me into the world, so, by this deep communion of submitted love, I send you.”* It is as if he tells them, and us that whatever we do it is meant to be at the prompting of a gentle tender breath which abides among us in all our locked up lives and allows us to open wide the doors and windows of our lives to sing God’s song. Amen.