
Pandemic Pentecost
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
May 31, 2020
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Numbers 11:24-30 and Acts 2:1-21

Today, we celebrate Pentecost! Isn't that exciting! Isn't this the time of year we all look forward to? Isn't this the most important Christian holiday of the year? I want to ask for a show of hands - how many of us gave presents to our loved ones to celebrate Pentecost today? How many of us made the effort to prepare special foods? How many of us called family members to say, "Happy Pentecost!" How many of us decorated our homes? Why are you looking at me funny? Do you mean to tell me that none of us celebrate Pentecost by ... celebrating? Perhaps we think that the big events of the year are Christmas and Easter. Who really celebrates Pentecost anyway? All right, Pentecostals are probably making a big deal about today, but in our churches, who celebrates Pentecost? Well, today - hopefully - we all will!

Of course, I am not actually surprised that we in the United Church do not have a strong history of really celebrating Pentecost. Because in terms of our faith, Pentecost is perhaps the most pivotal event in the history of the Christian church. Yes, you heard me properly. We do not celebrate Pentecost because Pentecost is truly foundational. It is formative. In other words - it is scary so we want to just avoid it.

Christianity - like all religions - was created as a way of framing reality in a way that was sensible, logical, comprehensible, tell-able, follow-able. History, stories, and ideals all combined to create a religious system that allowed power structures to be created, followed, and preserved. In Christianity, formal leaders like Jesus and St. Paul are fairly important. Events like crucifixion and resurrection are foundational. But prophets, scripture, and major events are all understandable, rational, controllable. We create stories that define Christianity and we choose how to tell those stories. Our faith stories are sensible, sane. In other words, religion has a lot to do with control and power structures. And I don't say that to be critical. Power structures help create a sense of community, security, and peace of mind. The "control" aspects of Christianity create the authority that we use to perform baptisms - and we will have a baptism next week - and

other important rituals. But power structures - by definition - include many elements of control.

Pentecost - however - is about lack of control, or perhaps better, loss of control. The historical Pentecost event was about the spirit. And the spirit acted as it willed. Pentecost is an invitation to a spiritual encounter that Christianity has struggled to embrace. Yes, we recognize the coming of the spirit as foundational and formative - Pentecost is after all considered to be the birth of the Christian Church. But embracing the spirit of God - particularly since the spirit of God is wild, uncontrollable, unstoppable - also generates resistance within us. How many of us heard the story in Acts and thought “I wish I had been there”? And how many of us heard the story and thought – “better them than me”? The spirit can be scary. Or at least, loss of control can be scary.

As human beings, we seem to strongly resist embracing the spirit and the transformation that comes with the spirit. And that’s not a new thing. In our reading from Numbers, “unauthorized” people express God’s spirit through prophecy, and the religious leaders try to shut them down. In our reading from Acts, although the tourists are amazed that they hear their own native languages, many of them ridicule the whole experience, choosing to interpret the actions of the disciples as a results of spirits, not spirit. Why is it that we - as human beings - resist the spirit so strongly? Why do we resist change? What exactly are we afraid of?

[slide: joan of arc]

I’m reminded of the true story of the person who came to be known as Joan of Arc. Joan - a young girl born as a peasant in the tiny village of Domremy, France - is very pious, and from an early age she hears voices from St. Michael, St. Catherine, and St. Margaret. Initially, the voices she hears are just personal and nurturing, but in the year 1428, her voices tell her to go to the King of France and to help him recapture the French kingdom from both the English and the Burgundians. And so she leaves her poor village and starts her long journey into the world of the rich and powerful. And she is - generally speaking - successful. She leads a number of spectacular military victories, and Charles is crowned at Rheims with Joan at his side. It’s an amazing - and true - story of hearing the voice of God and following through. It’s a story of great strength and piety founded on an

absolute trust in God and our own ability to hear and follow God's voice, even in the midst of confusion.

But as I'm sure you know, that is only half the story. The other half of the story is how she had to fight against the political systems, and the church itself, in order for her to follow the voices she heard. The king - her king - of course used her as a tool to achieve his own ends, and that is perhaps not so surprising. But I am always struck in her story at how the Church did not support her either. Joan is captured, put on trial as a heretic, and burned at the stake. The Church, the symbolic voice of God on earth, tried to silence the voice of God when it came through the mouth of a peasant girl. Many books and movies have been made about Joan of Arc, but my favourite is the 1999 movie starring Leelee Sobieski as Joan. To me, that version of Joan's story speaks to our fear of the Pentecost experience. During her trial, when Joan is being interrogated and threatened with torture by Bishop Cauchon, Joan says to the Bishop, "Why are you punishing me for talking to God?"

The Church was afraid of Joan because Joan related to God on her own terms, not moderated through the official Church. The spirit of God generates new life, but it also generates fear. The spirit creates fear because we usually prefer to believe we are in control. And people like Joan are called "free spirits" because they are beyond our control. Jesus said, "the spirit blows where it chooses, and you do not know where it comes from or where it goes". That's the spirit. Uncontrolled. Unpredictable. Raw. Power.

[slide: pentecost]

I'm going to go out on a limb and suggest that this year - 2020 - the invitation into the wild-ness of Pentecost is particularly unwelcome to our ears. With the pandemic, we are all feeling isolated, and we are grieving many loses, including our ability to simply meet each other in the ways we want to. We grieve the fact that a simple trip to a grocery store has become as complicated as a military operation, requiring finesse in both timing and tactics. Some of us are angry that society has now labelled us as "vulnerable" - without our permission! At this point, most of us want more control in our lives, not less. Perhaps we should just cancel Pentecost this year?

But in some ways, 2020 is the perfect year to celebrate Pentecost. Because the unpredictable nature of the spirit isn't just about loss of control, it's about loosening our grip on control and loosening our grip on our past - in the sense of not clinging to it so tightly. I realize it's completely normal to cling to our past, but the pandemic is also an opportunity to imagine a better future. I'm running into countless articles now about how the old normal wasn't actually working so well for a great many people, and that the pandemic is an opportunity to imagine and start to create a better reality. Some people do not want to "go back to normal" after the pandemic because "normal" wasn't actually that great.

For example, the pandemic has largely revealed the fact that in Canada, the health-care system you and I have created is very strongly driven by the motive of financial profit, not care for people. Don't get me wrong - many individuals who work in healthcare care deeply about people. But the system itself is optimized for profit. One aspect of this problem is in LTC. This week Jagmeet Singh posted this on Instagram, [slide: jagmeet]

"Workers in long-term care have been raising concerns FOR YEARS. Our seniors need more than compassion, they need action now. For profit LTC homes have been the site of the worse conditions. No one should make money off the backs of seniors. We must remove profit from LTC." It's a funny thing - in our story from Acts, the disciples speak in foreign languages and people react like they are drunk. But how drunk are we as a society to allow our health care systems to become profit centres? Health care is about care. Here's our chance to reimagine that.

[slide: us land distribution]

As another example, disparity of wealth and opportunity has risen dramatically in recent decades. But with the pandemic, the difference between having and not having can literally be life and death. Monopoly is not just a board game, it is being played out in real life globally with a minuscule number of winners and a massive number of losers who are suffering conditions that you and I would likely not survive at all.

[slide: 62 vs 3.6 billion]

How drunk are we as a society to put up with a system that allows 62 individual

people to have the same collective wealth as 3.6 billion people. The pandemic has revealed that we do not have a poverty crisis - we have a wealth crisis. Wealth is about giving opportunity to everyone. Here's our chance to reimagine that.

I could speak to other issues, but I hope many of you come for coffee group on Zoom Weds morning @ 10:30 this week, because I would love to have a discussion about the ways in which the "old normal" was not really working, and what "new normal" we can create that is actually more life-giving.

[slide: God closes a door]

One of the most famous mis-quotes from the Bible is the saying, "When God closes a door, God opens a window". Today, that mis-quote is being lived out, because church doors are closed, and we are opening more windows. Whoever created that famous mis-quote just didn't bother to mention the detail that the windows we are now opening are windows on our computers, tablets, and phones.

[slide: computer windows]

2020 is the perfect year to lift up Pentecost, because 2020 is our own Pentecost moment. We are in a great position to imagine the future by building on our past. Each of us just needs to pay attention to our own feelings, and work through what we are missing during our lock-down phase, and then together we will figure out how to keep doing what we care about. What are we learning from the pandemic that will help us reimagine the church - and I don't just mean church in an abstract sense, I mean Sydenham-Heritage United Church?

[slide: pentecost stained glass]

What are we learning in our isolation? I hope that we are learning what it is that we deeply value, because that will drive *how* we are in the future. Actually, it will also drive *who* we are in future. Our response to this pandemic is about our identity as a congregation. The pandemic is our Pentecost moment.

When I was in Rexdale, I participated in many community meetings with many different partner groups. Some of these meetings were to get a better handle on community needs - beyond the obvious needs that were already being serviced. And about 1.5 years ago I was in a multi-partner group and the word that floated to the surface

as one of the key needs was the word “isolation”. In Rexdale, given gang violence and other issues, many people were feeling isolated because they didn’t feel safe going outside. Isolation, and the more common label, “being lonely” were identified as huge needs 1.5 years ago. That problem existed pre-pandemic and I would bet the problem existed pre-pandemic even in Brantford.

Perhaps now that we’ve all had a personal taste of isolation, we as a church are in a much better position to address isolation as a community need in Brantford because now we all understand isolation much better. Perhaps we don’t know what to do today, but we will figure this out together as we move forward. Here’s our chance to reimagine isolation in our own community. And I look forward to hearing other ideas that surface from you all or course.

Pentecost was a defining moment in the birth of the Christian Church. The 2020 pandemic is our own Pentecost moment.

Happy Pentecost!

Amen.