
Pentecost is Now!
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 2:1-21

Today, we celebrate Pentecost! Isn't that exciting! 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 right. I said that 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 other words, religion has a lot to do with control and power structures.

And I don't say that to be critical. Power structures can 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 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. Loss of control can be scary. But what exactly are we afraid of?

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 political ends. And that is perhaps not so surprising given the nature of politics. 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.

So - given our own fear of not being in control ... what exactly - if anything - should we be celebrating today? Seriously!

For me, the importance of pentecost can be determined with 1 simple question. Here it is. Is pentecost something that happened 2000 years ago? Or is pentecost something that happens today - in the here and now? If you think pentecost happened 2000 years ago then perhaps you don’t see the point of this annual celebration. A celebration that to be honest is not really very celebratory. I mean we do not even get cake after the service.

If pentecost only happened 2000 years ago then I would agree that it’s a bit pointless to celebrate it today. I should just preach about the meaning of the latin words embedded in the word “pentecost”. Tie it in with some Jewish traditions that don’t actually fit, and go for my coffee - completely surrounded by no cake.

But instead, I want to argue that pentecost is meaningful to us - if we see it as something that happens with us today. But what should we be looking for today? What does pentecost even look like?

From the story from Acts, it sounds like 2000 years ago we would know it was pentecost because of the vivid description. “Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among the people, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” Is that what pentecost would look like today?

I’m going to argue no. And yes. 2000 years ago, the spirit caused people to speak

their truth - in different languages. And the people were shocked. Today, I think the pentecost experience is when people speak their truth - in whatever form makes sense today. Perhaps in a speech. Perhaps in a sermon. Perhaps in a tweet. The thing that makes it pentecost is that people need to speak their truth while others are trying to hide from that truth. Pentecost is when speaking truth is more important than not upsetting people.

So today, pentecost is about speaking truth to power. Pentecost is about speaking truths that nobody wants to hear. Pentecost is about speaking truths that people already know to be true but we resist the message. But where do we hear such voices today? Where are these voices that speak truth to power? Where might we find the voices of pentecost today? I'm glad you asked! I have a few options for your consideration I've collected over the past couple of years.

Our first candidate is Greta Thunberg, the 21 year old Swedish climate activist. She is energizing the planet by speaking about climate justice. And it's not just about lightbulbs with her. Greta believes that the climate crisis is also a crisis of justice. And that our salvation will only come when we respect and value equally all human life. She believes that small-minded me-first thinking has created the climate crisis. She believes that buying and building things will not solve a crisis created by buying and building things¹. She believes that our planet is being sacrificed so that a small number of people can make stupid amounts of money. She is an inspiration not only because she speaks truth. But because she herself struggles with Asperger Syndrome, OCD, and selective mutism. And in spite of that, and her age, she has done far more to inspire climate justice than the so-called "most powerful people on the planet".

Is Greta one of the voices we hear at pentecost? Does Greta share the voice of the spirit with us? I hear someone objecting that she is annoying. Well, what sort of messages do you expect to hear at pentecost? Do you seriously expect a boring, bland message that is irrelevant to us? Or an inspired, focused message that we actually need to hear about climate justice. Greta satisfies the first requirement of a pentecost voice. She shares a message we do not want to hear. And we don't want to hear it because we know she's right. Greta is bringing pentecost to the climate debate.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFkQSGyeCWg>.

Our second candidate is Ilhan Omar, a member of the US congress. She is helping to expose the massive racism and xenophobia that exists within the US Government. In her short time in office, she has already figured out why the establishment hates her. To quote her , “the establishment can’t stand that a refugee, a black woman, an immigrant, a Muslim, shows up in Congress thinking that she is equal to them.”² She believes that the US needs to become a country of the many, not a country for the few. Omar works to ensure that the US will not be a country of xenophobes. Omar is upsetting people who believe in the old boy’s network. Exposing hypocrisy and double-standards.

Does that feel a bit like the spirit? Uncontrolled and uncontrollable? Taking us to places where we have been trying to avoid going? But again, did you seriously expect the spirit to push you in the direction you were already going? Of course the spirit is going to lead us to places that we find uncomfortable. Omar is bringing pentecost to the US congress with a message that nobody wants to hear because they all know that she is right.

I wonder why people - perhaps including some of us sitting here - think that the spirit would come in ways that do not challenge us to change? Do we seriously expect anything called “winds of fire” to come in and say, “you’re just fine the way you are”? No!

The spirit is here to help - but that doesn’t mean that we get to just coast. Pentecost is always about change. Am I starting to make you uncomfortable right now? Good - because pentecost is now!

Our last candidate this morning is Rashida Tlaib (tah-eeb). Tlaib is also a US congresswoman, and a woman, a Muslim, and a person of Palestinian descent. She is bringing a voice of justice out in to the open in particular around Human Rights in many areas. Perhaps her most provocative statements are around how we need to support Human Rights. Instead of just picking a side when it comes to divisive issues. Being Palestinian, she is constantly harassed by people who want her to pick sides and to say something that can be twisted to sound antisemitic. But she is fighting for equal human rights for all. Including Palestinians and Israelis, Muslims, Jews, and everybody. She

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YOAJdSZkHg>.

encourages people to pick a value, not a side.

The need for pentecost - to speak truth to power is actually all around us today. Following the horrific attack by Hamas on Israel on Oct 7 last year, Israel has responded with vastly disproportionate force. And is in fact doing its best to commit a genocide on the people of Palestine. Israel has been murdering civilians and children with impunity, supported by our own government as well as other western powers.

As Canadians, and as Christians, we need to face the sad truth that our governments have always supported the colonization of Palestine by Israel. Our governments have always supported the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. We need to speak truth to power.

Today many pentecost voices are speaking truth to power. From rallies to university encampments, many voices are speaking truth to power to stop the ongoing genocide. I won't launch into what could be a second sermon right now. But these voices are pushing three messages:

- That the genocide of the Palestinian people is immoral and wrong.
- That the crisis is created by the west's support for the colonization of Palestine. And so, once again, western powers are dehumanizing the indigenous people of a land.
- That trying to solve every crisis with militarization is itself wrong. That peace in fact comes from justice, not from murdering your enemies. The global war machine must not be given free reign.

Those are my 3 candidates pentecost voices for today - along with my own. I'm sorry that my list was inadvertently sexist. I don't know why the most prominent voices speaking truth to power seem to be from women these days. I did check the most dominant male voices too you know. But between Trudeau, Ford, and Biden, I just do not hear them speaking truth to power. And I would love it if we all shared our own stories over cake - I mean over coffee - of voices we have heard recently of speaking truth to power. Because that is where we will find pentecost today. And I'm sure we all have a story to share. I

want to hear your story.

So let's bring this home now. Where is the voice of pentecost here in our own community? What voices do we hear that perhaps are unwelcome to our own ears precisely because we know that those voices are speaking truths that we do not want to hear? Where is it that we ourselves need to speak truth to power? Where is it that we ourselves can be the voice of pentecost today?

Pentecost is now!

Amen.