The Power of the Spirit – The Power of Love

Narrative Lectionary Pentecost

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Acts 2: 1-21

Philippians 4: 2-9 Russell Mitchell-Walker

There was a gathering in Jerusalem last week, as the [US moved](http://time.com/5275751/israel-netanyahu-embassy-jerusalem-opening/) their embassy for Israel to Jerusalem in a controversial move the coincided with protests in Palestine. Jerusalem is claimed by all three religions descended from Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Both the Jewish and Palestinian people claim it as their capital. So for the US to claim Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move its embassy there is an affront to Islam, as well as Christianity. The [protests](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/14/opinion/gaza-protests-organizer-great-return-march.html) in the Gaza strip that day, were part of a larger grassroots “March of Return” movement protesting that those living in the Gaza Strip are imprisoned behind the Israel border wall and not allowed out, as well as many goods and services are not allowed in. As a result the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip suffer from poor water supply, lack of food, limited energy, and high unemployment. Thus this protest is part of a larger picture and supported by all political parties, including Hamas, as a non-violent movement toward change. On the day of the embassy opening, over 50 unarmed civilians were killed, for approaching the border in non-violent protest. The Israel government framed it as a violent attack orchestrated by Hamas to threaten the people of Israel. The two sides clearly were speaking two different languages and not hearing nor understanding each other.

Contrasted with this is the gathering in Jerusalem at Pentecost that we read today in Acts. The followers of Jesus have gathered in Jerusalem to wait, as instructed by Jesus before he ascended to heaven. The community gathered included the disciples as well as women and men who were also followers of Jesus. There were people gathered for the festival of Shauvot, which celebrated the freedom of the Israelites arriving in Sinai and receiving the Ten Commandments. People were gathered from all over who spoke in many different languages. Then, suddenly a great wind comes and those gathered were filled with the Holy Spirit after being touched by what seemed like tongues of fire, and they began speaking in other languages. Not only those gathered in the room of followers but all nearby were affected. Those who spoke one language, could understand others who spoke a different language. It was a powerful experience of unity, of oneness under God. The Holy Spirit did not only come to the men who were Jesus’ disciples, it also came to the women, and all who were gathered in that room. The Spirit impacted so many more as well, because if we kept reading the passage, Peters’ speech continues, in which he recounts Jesus’ life and deeds, and then we learn that 3000 people became Christian that day. Reading a little further, we also learn that they formed new communities together, devoting themselves to the apostles teaching, and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers. They sold all they had and held everything in common, so everybody had what they needed.

This is the radical power of the Holy Spirit. Of the gospel. A transformation of the way of life, and establishing of a new community that would be viewed as radical by societal standards then, and now. Women were in leadership, and viewed as equal. The redistribution of wealth, would be considered communist by some in todays world. Yet this is what being filled with the Spirit resulted in for the early Christians. This is the kind of community many are looking for and dreaming of today.

Have our lives been transformed in this way by the message of the gospel? Do we experience the Holy Spirit in this way? It is a little out of our realm of experience isn’t it? But maybe we need to be more open to how we might experience God’s Spirit in our lives. When I was in Seattle last month for the Leadership in the New Parish course and the Inhabit Conference, two of my United Church colleagues were talking about what kinds of things they do for worship to symbolize the coming of the Holy Spirit for Pentecost. They were sharing ideas such as having orange and red streamers, balloons, streamers with fans, bubbles – all the things we use to symbolize fire and wind. Jessica, who had come from a Charismatic background, was nearby and listening to the conversation, and with all seriousness, added to the conversation by saying: “Oh, we would just pray for the Holy Spirit to come!” My friends were surprised and caught off guard, then felt kind of silly, and all three laughed hysterically. We can sometimes spend too much time trying to recreate an experience symbolically when maybe all we need to do is pray and be open to God’s presence. The matter of fact-ness of Jessica’s experience brought a whole new reality and experience to our perspective. It is a gift and a joy, when we come together with diverse experiences and backgrounds and can learn from and be challenged by one another. Being together in community, is truly a joy, both in times of happiness and in times of challenge.

The Philippians passage tells us to rejoice in the Lord always. We may think that is not possible as how can I rejoice when I am sad, or things are tough. Joy and happiness are not the same and we can tend to get that confused. Joy, which gives us a reason to rejoice is deeper than happiness. Joy comes from a sense of wellbeing, from a knowing that we are loved, that we are not alone, which can bring us a deep sense of peace. Even in our deepest sadness we can experience or find that joy and rejoice in the love and support we experience or have in our community. In the movie Inside Out, we follow Rileys’ emotions of Joy, Sadness, Anger, Disgust and Fear in her mind, through a period in her teenage life. Joy discovers the interconnectedness of joy and sadness when she was trapped in the place of forgotten memories. She had a core memory of Riley’s that she had to get out of there and as she reflected on the memories she found one that helped her understand the importance of sadness

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-m5oY5RQIC8>

Sadness brought Riley’s mom and dad for support and then the team, which brought joy. Sadness and joy are intertwined. We can have joy in the midst of sadness, when we draw on the love that is always with us. So we can rejoice in the Lord always, because God is always with us, we are not alone. We are loved.

This weekend we had another gathering of people that was quite a contrast from the one in Jerusalem last week. Windsor Castle was filled with joy as the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle took place uniting a nation, and many in the world. It was a celebration of love, a universal language that all can understand even though some refuse to. Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the US, Michael Curry, preached a wonderful [sermon](https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/19/europe/michael-curry-royal-wedding-sermon-full-text-intl/index.html) about the power love, challenging all those there and all those listening to imagine if love was the way:

Imagine our homes and families when love is the way. Imagine neighborhoods and communities where love is the way. Imagine governments and nations where love is the way. Imagine business and commerce when love is the way.

He knows the transforming power of love. He also talked about Pierre Tielhard de Chardin saying that fire was the greatest discovery of humanity and that if we ever harness the energy of love, it will be the second time in history that humanity discovers fire. The folk gathered in the Jerusalem that Pentecost day, discovered this. The fire they experienced was the fire of love from the Holy Spirit, that embraced them, embodied them, and gave them power to live in radically new ways. This is the power of love, the power of God, for God is love. May we celebrate that love, that power and be open to the Holy Spirit bringing power to our lives, and share it with others.