

## “Barriers Become Bridges”

Acts 2:1-21

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“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” 12All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” 13But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

14But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let

this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 16No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 18Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. 19And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. 20The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. 21Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

"...they were all together in one place." I've skimmed over that phrase in the Pentecost reading every year. But not this year. This year, it stopped me in my tracks because it brought up all my grief. Grief because of all I miss about the simplicity of our "being all together in one place" - of hearing our physical sanctuary ring with the sounds of four part harmony on a Sunday morning, of having to speak into the microphone multiple times to gently ask folks to return to their seats during our rowdy LPC passing of the peace, of hearing our little ones race around the hallways as we chatter during a church potluck, of looking into each of your faces as you come forward to eat the bread and drink the cup of communion. "...they were all together in one place". I am realizing now that I have taken that simplicity for granted. It reminds me of

the very thing that feels so difficult about life during this pandemic: the reality of being physically distant from those we love.

And even as I sit with that grief, something else in this text calls out to me. Our text says that “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability... each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.” It turns out that there was something making things difficult for this early gathering of believers too - the fact that *language* was separating them from so many in their community. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, and all the rest in that long list - the early church literally did not have the language to reach them. But then the Holy Spirit came. And what strikes me is that the Spirit took the *very thing that was separating these early believers from their community* - language - and used it to bring them together. Those people of many nations explained that “in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” Language was a barrier keeping them apart, but the Spirit arrived and transformed that very barrier into the bridge that united them and that allowed them to spread the good news of God’s love to those who had never heard it before.

And this gave me hope. Because if the Spirit could transform the barrier of language into a bridge that brought believers together, I know that the Spirit can transform the barrier of physical distancing into a bridge for us today. I know this in part because I am already seeing it happen. When this pandemic hit and we stopped worshipping in person, I watched you, the people of God, rise up with fresh ideas for how we could extend care to one another. One of our members, Carol Herzog, rallied together

a group of folks at our church to dedicate themselves to showering every person in our church with love on their birthday. I've witnessed tender stories being shared with great vulnerability in Zoom gatherings and over email, stories that had not been shared in this way before as we began to have a new appreciation for our connections to each other. I've seen creativity come out of the woodwork of our congregation, from technological savvy that helps us connect online to new works of music that we share in online worship. And beyond our own church family, our presence online has invited folks in for the first time who have never stepped foot through the physical doors of our sanctuary. The Spirit has descended upon us and I can tell you that I already see beautiful ways that God is transforming the barrier of physical distance into something that brings life not just to us, but to those all around us.

Perhaps you are like me, and even amidst these signs of hopeful creativity and new life, you feel incredibly inadequate as we forge deeper into the unknown. Will I have the energy I need to adapt to whatever this world will look like on the other side of this pandemic? What will happen in the moments that I fall short because I don't have the right skills, the patience, or the knowledge to meet the challenges of a new day? Or if you are a white person like me, perhaps the state-sponsored and state-sanctioned murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Tony McDade in the last couple months and weeks have reawakened you to all that you have left undone in the work of dismantling white supremacy. If you are like me, you have felt paralyzed by the shame of all you have not done, tempted to disengage or numb yourself to the cries for justice our

black siblings are letting out in the streets even as we speak. What I have to say about this today is not enough, and I promise you it will be part of ongoing conversations in the coming days, weeks, and months.

What I do have to say today is that there is hope for those of us who are taking an inventory of who we are, of all we have left undone, of all our inadequacies, our moral failures, our complacency and complicity to systemic racism in this country. For the bold, beautiful sermon in the latter half of this text is given by the disciple who is perhaps best known for his failures and his complicity in perpetrating injustice - by Peter, who is most famous in the Gospel accounts for denying Jesus 3 times and deserting him as he went to the cross. Theologian Debra Mumford puts it this way: "The one who had denied Christ began to publicly preach Christ to any and all who would listen."<sup>1</sup> I see myself in the Peter who denied and deserted Jesus, for I have denied and deserted my siblings of color every time I have allowed my advocacy for them to wane and sleep until the next time they are murdered and their name becomes another hashtag. Peter is not unlike Judas, as both betrayed their friend, but the major difference between them is that Peter said 'no' to the shame spiral that ultimately claimed the life of Judas in the end. Peter offered his failures, his complacency, his complicity, his shame to the God he had found in Jesus and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, *he* was transformed into one who could preach the Good News with abandon.

Friends, the Spirit will not only transform our barriers into bridges during this time when we are physically distant from each

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<sup>1</sup> Debra J. Mumford, *Commentary on Acts 2:1-21*, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4458](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4458)

other, but, if we let Her, She will transform *us* into people who can live boldly into the work of justice God is doing in the present moment. It is not ours to scrape together all that we need to live into this moment of being the Church in a pandemic. It is not ours to spiral into numbness and disengagement because of all we have left undone thus far in the fight against white supremacy, America's original sin. It is ours to open our hearts and our lives to the Spirit who will melt us, mold us, use us, and fill us to be God's presence in this turbulent time. It is ours to offer our failure and shame, our complacency and complicity to the Spirit so She can burn in her purifying fire and transform it into the energy, compassion, and radical action that will root out the idol of whiteness wherever it is found in our communities, institutions, and indeed in our own hearts. The Spirit is blowing through this place, through our nation, through the Church, with fire. The only question is whether we will allow our own lives to be caught with the flame of this new life. Amen.