

Spirit

Acts 2:1-21

It has been a tough and emotional week for many of us. Watching uprisings and videos of police on the necks of George Floyd. In the midst of pandemic the anger and chaos spreading we are still called to be a uniting people of the Spirit.

As a white man whose inheritance has been a clear advantage because of the color of my skin, living on land taken from others, and whose economy's history thrived under chattel slavery I have found that in discussions of race there is really only one appropriate spiritual attitude when facing the concerns of those who have been oppressed because of the color of their skin. Learn, follow, and repent when participation in systems of injustice are revealed.

Where did I learn this? For 5 years I was the pastor at an African American Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. It was the only church in the middle of public and low-income housing units in that city. This was not the first time my ministry had been in neighborhoods like this. I had worked in the projects of Cabrini Green, Humbolt Park, and one of the poorest areas in South Louisiana.

Yet, my experiences with Renaissance Presbyterian Church will indelibly influence my thinking forever. These saints taught me more about compassion and righteous anger than I could have learned anywhere else.

I remember the meeting with the elders where I offered to preach and asked to have my ministry housed in their building. When I told them I would preach without pay there was a huge

sigh of relief. I later found that their \$24,000 a year budget could not sustain paying a minister.

Their history was intricately woven into our nation's sins of slavery and systemic racism. For over 100 years the land the church stood upon had been a Negro school built by the Presbyterian Mission Association for educating African Americans during the horrible years of segregation.

On that land, in 1969, had been the first interracial marriage in Chattanooga and only the 3rd in the state of Tennessee. Every local Presbyterian Church had refused to let the wedding in their building (even though one of the people being married was a Presbyterian Minister). So, they had the wedding in what was then a field.

Local Baptist elders worked with the Black Panthers in helping protect the wedding party from the threat that the KKK had given of bombing and snipers.

The church itself was built with no windows in its sanctuary. Why would this be needed? It was so that bombs could not be thrown into the church to destroy it.

Sometimes we forget that before we worried about Targets being looted, some of our churches had to worry about their fellow Christian citizens burning their churches to the ground because of the color of their skin.

I listened, I followed, and I repented.

The lessons I learned there about racism in the US were life changing. They made me want to change myself and be a better human, as well as, helping in change others toward seeing the full humanity in all people.

Sometimes our churches have benefited from their location to systems of oppression. Sometimes we have suffered from standing as allies with those who are oppressed, but we have found the Spirit of God there. It is never too political to affirm the full humanity of any other person that is our neighbor in this world, it is our Christian responsibility.

There are two truths about Pentecost. First, that the biblical account of divisions between peoples has to do with an unrighteous thought that people will have the power, strength, and authority of God. Usurping their humanity to become divine and thus ignoring their creator. This is most clearly stated in the story of the Tower of Babel.

People gather together to unify and build a tower to the clouds. To stop their attempt at subsuming God's power their creator scatters them by giving them different languages so that they can no longer understand one another. God sow's confusion among them to thwart their godless pursuits.

Then there is the turning back of this confusing chaos. Where languages were knit together by the advent of the Spirit among the church. The gathering of diversity, speaking the same name as their hope. In response to that same Holy Spirit they will have the fire which will bring about a co-mutuality of help. The Spirit will not allow any to have too much while others go without. The proper response to the Spirit in the church is to give to each other as each has need.

Because the Spirit who comes brings community out of chaos, there can be no space in faith for racial hatred or prejudice. Whether that prejudice is perpetuated by power, financial

systems, business communities, religious systems, or the tweets of powerful men.

Racism exists. White supremacy exists. White privilege exists. Prejudices exist. They are systemic and practiced in our mostly Caucasian denomination. They are present in our own church in ways we sinfully do not want to always acknowledge.

If not us, then who in this world will transform chaos into loving community? The good news is that we can repent. We can be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We can choose life and life in more abundance. Recognize the dignity in all humans by Loving our Neighbor as ourselves. We can say with Peter, "I now know that God shows no partiality." Who gives us this power for bringing community out of chaos? It is the Spirit we have received that gives us this power. You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit Comes on you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Newark, Hackettstown and to the ends of the earth.