

Sermon May 31, 2020

Grace Mercy and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

A very blessed and peaceful Pentecost Sunday to you all. Our prayer here at Redeemer is that the Holy spirit would bless you all, increase your faith, and stir your hearts to hope in the promises of God in Jesus Christ.

On this Sunday when we celebrate the bestowal of the Holy Spirit on the church, we think about the birth of God's work in the church on earth. And we give thanks for the birth of faith in our own hearts, and especially in the hearts of our young people. Today would have been the celebration of Confirmation, or what we call the Affirmation of Baptism, by our 9th grade young people. They have completed two years of classes and activities and were preparing for this Sunday when the Covid19 Pandemic struck. Because of restrictions on our worship gatherings, we decided to put off their confirmation until Reformation Sunday this coming October. Hopefully by then, we will be allowed to gather in person and celebrate Holy communion together. I want to lift up those confirmands right now and ask you all to pray for them in their life of faith. They are:

Mackenzie Backhaus, Sofia Covello, Noah Eide, Erin Grunfelder, Sean Habas, Abby Kunz, Lily Mulhall, and Amanda Rosen.

Over the course of our Confirmation instruction program, several adults have volunteered to be faith mentors to these young people, and I want to lift up their names: Faith Mentors – Kari Covello, Pete Eide, Ginelle Grunfelder, Kristen Kunz, Rich Kunz, April Pacenza, Gwen Pra and Marian Ufferfilge.

Our confirmation program has been a joint effort between Redeemer, Calvary in Allendale, and Zion in Saddle River, and we lift up those second year confirmation students in those congregations and their mentors as well:

Calvary-- Anna Nooney - Faith Mentor Nancy Glaeser

Zion-- Josie Perretta – Faith Mentor Antoinette Walder

Gavin Post – Faith Mentor Jennifer Roettger

Chase Roettger – Faith Mentor Tracey Post

Tristian Walder – Faith Mentor Stephen Perretta

As we mourn our inability to celebrate their Affirmation of Baptism this Pentecost Sunday, we are also mindful of the larger social context of this disruption to our plans, and the greater chaos of our particular national moment, especially this past week, and thus it is fitting that we would turn toward the promise of the Holy Spirit that our Lord Jesus Christ gives, to calm our hearts, sooth our grief, and give us hope for the future of the church and our world.

From the scriptures, and from the collective experience of the church, we learn that the Holy spirit always arrives by giving the blessing of new birth. It is a spirit of new birth, of new life, of new vision and spiritual power, repeatedly given to the church over time, to help it in its very specific ministry in the world.

The holy spirit comes to kickstart the church in its mission on behalf of the Kingdom of God. God's Kingdom was a prominent feature of Jesus' teaching and preaching, and to continue that work, he promised the Holy spirit to his disciples as the coming "Advocate", who would come alongside the church after Jesus' ascension into heaven. Thus, the bestowal of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is properly understood as the birth of the church and a time of celebration because the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church means that Jesus keeps his promises. On this Pentecost Sunday, I am reminded of an observance that my father encouraged as Pastor of the church I grew up in. He called Pentecost Sunday "Cup Cake Sunday", and called on the congregation to make cupcakes to help celebrate the birthday of the church. If you feel so inspired, pull out your cupcake tins this afternoon, and make some cupcakes for dessert tonight, in honor of the birthday of the Church.

That birth of the church so many years ago has grown to embrace almost a quarter of humanity and continues today in the hearts of believers the world over. In its moment of infancy, the ministry of the 12 apostles and a few hundred other followers became a universal movement that embraced Gentiles, that is, non-Jews of every stripe. Because of the presence of the Holy spirit in the church, the mission of Jesus Christ, which is characterized by reconciliation between a fallen humanity and a righteous but loving God, reaches out to the whole world. You and I and all believers the world over, constitute the continuation of that original mission through time. We are the new fruit of that first outpouring of the

spirit, and which inspired our ancestors in the faith to plant the church in their day, just as they were the fruit of new birth of those who planted seeds of the holy spirit in their own day.

On a day like today, we must call on the holy spirit to inspire us again in Jesus' original vision of God's righteous Kingdom. In our context, it seems like the work of the church only grows harder. These young people who would have been confirmed today, and their generation, experience ever greater pressure to view the church as inconsequential to the lives they are hoping to lead in their future. They are taught early and clearly how school and all their extracurricular activities are forming them into the successful young people they hope to be. But the time spent in worship, bible study, and prayer seems to have no specific or practical value. Viewed from the outside, and with a cynical eye, the church looks as if it has worn out its role in our culture. Its beliefs seem at times quaint, and at other times politically inconvenient, its rituals old and worn out, and its scriptures and history endlessly argued over. Then there are the scandals that surround the church in our day, the history of sexual abuse, the manipulation and hypocrisy of clergy, and the carelessness or neglect of adult volunteers. Add to this list a resounding silence in the face of systemic racism and sexism and a steady if not outright hostile rejection of new understandings of gender and power, and young people start to yawn at the idea of a vital and engaged church in the world.

Into this context, the church tries to speak to its young people, and to the society around us, about the grace of God, who loves the world so much that he would come and die for that world. Into this context, where our young people now struggle to hope for the life they had been preparing for before the corona virus struck, we speak of faith in the presence of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Into this present context, where systemic racism and brutality clearly harm black Americans and people of color more than white people, we speak of the justice of the Kingdom of God.

The problem is not the message of God's Kingdom, for in Jesus teaching, it is clearly applicable to our context. Jesus began his ministry by announcing the work of the spirit to address directly the plight of those who are unfairly burdened in some way. He quoted from Isaiah, in Luke chapter 4,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,*

because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.”

This spirit must spark love, repentance and hope in those people first, if it is to be said to be from the Holy Spirit at all. But then it has to be heard by US. It should also be allowed to speak to our young people, and especially our young people who come out of relative privilege. Indeed, in our present context struggling with systemic racism, the problem with the Spirit’s message about God’s righteous kingdom seems more and more to hinge not on the ambivalence of our young people, or the distractions and diversions of our culture, but on white Christians’ inability to recognize our relative power and privilege, or to see the power of our whiteness, as the problem. To see this power and all of its assumptions at work, watch the video from just last week, of the young white woman in central park, Amy Cooper, threatening to call and then calling the police on a black man who surprised her and asked her to leash her dog. White expectations and assumptions about the police and black men are there in plain sight. The fact that in the end, nothing happened to the black man misses the point. Whatever it is that protects or prevents us from recognizing the privilege in wielding such power is what prevents the church in our context from hearing the message of the Holy Spirit about God’s righteous Kingdom. Protests and anger in response to the death of George Floyd and others are merely the tip of the iceberg. The iceberg itself, the unmoving mass on which all our efforts at racial reconciliation always founder, is what lies in the subconsciousness of white people.

Each year on Pentecost Sunday, when we ask our confirmands to affirm their baptism, we ask them to consider the very specific and biblically based promises that their parents and sponsors made at their baptism. For most of our current 9th graders, this happened in their first year of life, just 14 or 15 years ago. These promises are summed up in the Affirmation of Baptism service. For the sake of remembering our own confirmation, we will all do that together later in this service, after we sing the hymn of the day. In the Affirmation of Baptism service, the first promises have to do with the renouncing of evil.

“People of God, do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God, the powers of this world that rebel against God, and the ways of sin that draw you from God?

We renounce them.”

Next comes the confessing of the faith of the church using the words of the ancient creed, and then the commitment to the five promises of baptism:

to live among God’s faithful people,
to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper,
to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,
to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,
and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?

What the Holy spirit strives to promote in us through these renouncements, confession, and promises, is a full and reconciled relationship with God throughout our lives. This faithful living helps create and perpetuate a faithful church. As Martin Luther always pointed out, it is not our work, but the power of the Holy Spirit in us that does this. Thus, what better way is there to say that we live with God, and by faith in God, than by renouncing the power of evil in the world, confessing the presence and work of God in the Holy Trinity, and then committing ourselves to living with others in the faith? And in our promises to live a baptismal life, we see the activities that make life with God more vital and important in the world. We live with others who are striving to live according to the same baptismal promises. We worship together, even digitally now, and work to be reconciled to one another even in the face of our moral and social failures. This takes constant repentance and heartfelt desire to put the needs of others before our own. For how can we “forgive the sins of any, or retain the sins of any,…” as Jesus promises in our Gospel Lesson today, if we are not prepared to see our own sin for what it is, the “log in our own eye,” even in our own way of life, and then repent of that sin?

Thus, we must listen for the Spirit speaking to us in the Scriptures and the sacraments, through which we hear that Christ’s love for us brings us and holds us permanently in God’s loving embrace. We speak out in our words and actions and hope to say to the world that God loves it so much that he sent his only Son to die for it and to be raised from the dead on the third day. Then we can serve other people, and especially those who are more vulnerable than ourselves. Finally, we

work for the betterment of the world using the values of God's Kingdom that Christ shows us in the way he lived and died.

This work is not just for making things better, but it is a working for the common good that always points back to the love of God that inspired it in the first place. That is to say, it is a work for the sake of witness. When the church strives for justice and peace, it is not naively thinking that those things will necessarily follow right away. This is so important for our youth to learn, but also for our cynical and jaded adult selves. Rather, we expect criticism, we expect failure, we expect resistance, we expect sabotage. We expect to be dismissed as idealistic dreamers, out of touch with reality, and impractical, filled, as it were, with new wine. Those are always the devil's best arguments against the work of the spirit.

Anyway, the church has too much recorded history under its belt to believe that human work and effort can on its own bring in the peace and justice of the Kingdom of God. Rather, the values we choose to live by, which we hold up to ourselves and the world ARE the point. The testimony to God's love, justice and peace IS the point. It is a testimony about the Kingdom's future reconciliation between all people and God. The point of the candle burning in the night is the candle; the point of the flag waving in the storm is the flag. They are testimonies, signals that point to the faith and hope that raised them up in the first place. The storm may cover the earth in the short term, and the night might seem to last forever, but the testimony we make is that God's truth, justice and peace are coming. One day, as Peter quotes the prophet's words in our first lesson today; the birth of God's new dawn is coming.

"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.

And what will be the content of that prophecy? What will be the proclamation that is made in that day? It will be what the church has always proclaimed, that

Christ came to be killed and then raised up for the sake of the world, so that the world's sin may be forgiven, and the world's warring peoples may be reconciled to one another, our status before our maker declared as reconciled and redeemed. This will entail, in the spirit of Jesus, that all positions of privilege and power will be brought low, and all positions of want and oppression will be brought high. And, as Jesus says, the meek shall inherit the earth.

In the meantime, the church strives to listen to the prodding of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is calling the church into more clear witness for the sake of those who are oppressed and vulnerable, that we can live our lives for the sake of other people because we no longer fear death. For if God has raised Christ from the dead, and he is with us now in the presence of the Holy Spirit, then we too have died with Christ in our baptisms, and we too now live his eternal life that inspires all that we say and do. No longer do we fear looking into the mirror of moral self-examination, and finding that we are failing to protect the weak and vulnerable among us. No longer do we fear seeing ourselves as uncaring and dismissive of the cries of others who have been wronged. No longer do we fear learning that we have been socialized in a form of racism that comes out even when we think we are justified or politically correct. No longer do we fear the idea that bold, nation-wide statements of repentance and solidarity will help to further racial reconciliation in our country. For we know that because Christ lives, we shall live also, and that because Christ forgives, we too shall be forgiven, and that because Christ loves, we too shall be loved. In all our work as church, we will strive to live up to this one task in the Holy Spirit, to honor the sacrifice of Christ by being willing to take on self-sacrifice for the good of those for whom Christ died.

This is the faith which we affirm, and call our young people to affirm. No longer shall we fear calling our youth into this understanding. For Mackenzie, Sofia, Noah, Erin, Sean, Abby, Lily, and Amanda, we lay these truths before them and remind them that God is with them always, that Christ is with them always, that the Holy spirit is with them always, that as members of Christ's church, they are the first fruits of those who hope in God. Their striving will be noted. Their futures are indeed bright, but not because the world is doing so well. No, their futures are secured by the promises of God through Christ. In the power of Christ and the Holy spirit, their gifts will be used for the good of others, their suffering will be redeemed, their lives will be fulfilled in God. God is doing this even now, and it is

wonderful in our sight. May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.