

“Ripple Effects”

Acts 2:1-13

Pentecost

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When I was a boy, growing up as a fan of the Minnesota Vikings in football, the only thing I knew about Hubert Humphrey was that the domed stadium that the Vikings played in was named after him.

It wasn't until I was an adult that I learned a bit more.
Some of you will remember Hubert Humphrey.

Vice-president of the United States for four years in the 1960s.
Two-time senator from Minnesota.

And yet, in these days of social distancing, I was moved to hear what Humphrey did before he became a national figure, when he was Mayor of Minneapolis.

The year was 1946.
And it was a time when polio was a major threat to children.
Especially in the summer.

I didn't know this, but there were “Stay at Home” campaigns to try to keep kids at home, entertained at home in the summer, so they wouldn't leave the house, go outside and play...and thereby risk being struck by the virus that causes polio.

You know what Mayor Humphrey did that summer?
He got on the radio, and he read the comics from the newspaper to the children of his city.

He brought his own kids, ages 7 and 4, to help him out.
There he was, giving color commentary on Blondie and Dagwood.

It was amusing, and it was sweet.

But as historian Jill Lepore points out, there was almost a faint sense of desperation...

After all, polio was called “the baby plague,” because young children were the most vulnerable.

And here was Hubert Humphrey, mayor of a major metropolitan city...offering words, mere little words...to try to keep children entertained and safe while they were quarantined at home for the summer...¹

I got to thinking about all that.

Hubert Humphry did not have a stadium named after him because he read the comics during quarantine.

But it was, I would submit, a meaningful thing to do.

How meaningful?

Who knows?

Who knows what children were helped by what he did?

What if perhaps a child’s life was saved because they stayed inside, looking forward to Mayor Humphrey reading the funnies?

It’s sometimes hard to sort out what is truly meaningful in our lives, what it is that makes a difference.

It’s one of the things that can be a challenge during this time.

¹ As heard on The New Yorker Radio Hour podcast, in an interview by David Remnick with Jill Lepore, May 15, 2020.

When every day looks the same, and we're encouraged to socially distance from others, how do you know what difference you're making?

All of which makes the story of PENTECOST a story that we desperately need to hear. The story of Pentecost is, at least in part, a story about MEANING...about how meaning is given to our lives.

The disciples are gathered together, and the Holy Spirit comes upon them, giving them the ability to speak in different languages.

And Jews from all over are in Jerusalem, and they hear these Galileans speaking in their language, and they are astounded!

Luke writes:

All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

What does this mean?

The people who gathered at Pentecost were in the midst of the birth of God's Church! But they didn't know what it meant! God was doing something new, but they had no clue what was going on.

They were perplexed, confused, baffled.

Neither the disciples who were speaking in different tongues, nor the gathered faithful who heard those tongues—none of them knew how that day would play out. None of them knew that all these years later, WE would still be feeling the ripple effects of that Pentecost from long ago...

Something about it feels similar to our own situation right now.

I don't mean that God has caused the pandemic.

I do mean that we don't know how this particular time in our world is going to play out either.

As one writer put it recently:

“The public square is thick today with augurs and prophets claiming to foresee the post-Covid world to come....[There are] foreign journalists asking what the pandemic will mean for the American presidential election, populism...race relations, economic growth, higher education...And they seem awfully put out when I say I have no idea.”²

It's true, right?

We have no idea what this pandemic will mean for our lives.

What the ripple effects will be.

And we have no idea what this pandemic will mean for God's Church.

- When it's all over, will more people come to church because we realize how precious being together really is?
- Will the pandemic help give birth to a new focus for Jesus's followers, with a renewed understanding of justice and grace?
- Or will the Church quickly forget the pandemic, and want to get away from it instead of learning from it?

² Mark Lilla, “No One Knows What's Going to Happen,” in *The New York Times*, May 22, 2020.

This is why the Pentecost story is so important for us to hear.

Pentecost is not about the disciples giving NEW MEANING to their own lives, coming up with brilliant strategic plan of their own, to build God's Church. Pentecost is about what God did through their lives to startle them, to surprise them, when they did not have a clue...

Just look at Peter.

If you read on in chapter 2, you read that Peter's Pentecost sermon was a brilliant success! 3,000 new believers brought into the fold!

So Peter spends the next few chapters in the book of Acts believing that his mission is for his fellow Israelites, that THAT is who God wants in God's Church.

But then we get to chapter 10.

When Peter has a vision, and he meets a Gentile named Cornelius, and the Holy Spirit shows Peter that God's Church is ALSO meant to be a place for Gentiles to call home.

Did that definition of Church come from Peter?
Or did it come from God?

We often think that the miracle at Pentecost was when the disciples spoke in all those languages. But what if the REAL miracle occurred when God used someone like Peter—

someone who denied Jesus,
who abandoned Jesus before Jesus died—

when God gave Peter a second chance at Pentecost, and Peter stood up to speak...and God used Peter's words...just a few simple words...and the ripple effects are still being felt to this day...

I suspect that while most of you had heard of Hubert Humphrey before, the name Olga Sanchez Martinez is less familiar. Ms. Martinez runs a shelter and clinic in Mexico for migrants who have been injured and maimed by trains. Most often from Central America, many of them children, these migrants come to her when they've fallen off of a train, or been beaten by bandits on their journey from Central America into Mexico.

As her story is told in the bestselling book, "Enrique's Journey," Ms. Martinez was informed 30 years ago by a doctor that she had cancer and only had months to live.

"I was never very religious," she said, "but that day I went to church. I kneeled. I prayed....heal me, and I will help others."

A year later, she was still alive. The cancer, it turned out, was benign. But her conversation with God grew and grew and grew. It had an effect on her life that she never predicted.

One day she saw a 13-year-old boy from El Salvador who had lost both legs trying to board a train, and she remembered her promise. She brought the boy into her home and helped him recuperate.

Three days later, she met another boy who had lost both arms.

"Don't feel alone. I will help you," she said.

She begged for food, for money.

There was no business plan.

Eventually, she was able to buy a piece of land and build a shelter.

Thirty years later, Ms. Martinez runs the Shelter of Jesus the Good Shepherd, helping migrants who are disabled receive health care and hope.

To these people who have lost so much, she tells them of her own time of darkness 30 years ago, and she says, “God needs you.”³

Just words...but in the hands of the Holy Spirit, they can make all the difference.

Friends, the Holy Spirit is saying the same thing to us:

God needs you.

In these unusual days, it may not always be in the ways that we are used to serving God. But God needs your compassion. God needs your energy. God needs your love.

Pentecost tells us that God can do things with the most unlikely person, in the smallest action, the most seemingly insignificant words...God can take those words and change the course of a life...

Some of you may have seen the recent movie “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood,” about a friendship between a journalist and Fred Rogers, from Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood.

The movie reminded me of another journalist—not the one depicted in the film—but someone who had a very similar story.

Tim Madigan is a writer for *The Ft.-Worth Star Telegram*.

³ Sonia Nazario, “Enrique’s Journey,” New York: Random House, 2014.

Back in 1995, Madigan was sent to interview Fred Rogers. He was astonished to find himself conducting “an interview unlike any I had conducted before.”

As Madigan writes,

“Fred wanted to know the truth of your life,
the nature of your insides,
and had room enough in his own spirit
to embrace without judgment
whatever that truth might be.”

It was Fred Rogers’ ability to embrace without judgment that became an ENORMOUSLY important to Madigan just a couple years later.

By late 1997, Madigan’s marriage was falling apart.

So Madigan wrote to Fred Rogers, ashamed to be sharing this news with him.

Fred Rogers wrote back:

“My dear Tim,

Bless your heart. I feel so for you—for all of you—but Tim, please know that I would never forsake you, that I will never be disappointed in you, that I would never stop loving you....

You know you are in my prayers...”

According to Madigan, Mr. Rogers “guided [him] through” that time, and the healing words that Mr. Rogers offered helped him not only to repair his marriage, but also to repair Tim’s broken relationship with his own father.

And so it was, six years after Fred Rogers died, that Tim Madigan was visiting his dad.

Their relationship was on the mend.

But Madigan's father was suffering from Alzheimer's and getting worse.

Madigan writes:

“On one of my regular visits home...I found dad weakened from pneumonia...On a Saturday morning, I helped get him into the shower, helped him with a bar of soap, and...later on that same morning, I sat down close to Dad in his living room....Dad looked at me, and his eyes moistened.

““May God bless you,”” his father said to Tim.

“Then he was gone, back into the recesses of his disease. But in that moment, in that one look, in those few words, the heavens parted for me...I had received the benediction from my father that I had craved for so long.”⁴

The smallest words, the seemingly most insignificant actions—
they can make all the difference
when the Holy Spirit gets hold of them.

As you and I enter a summer unlike any summer we've ever known...let me remind you:

God needs you!

⁴ Tim Madigan, “I'm Proud of You: My Friendship with Fred Rogers,” Los Angeles: Ubuntu Press, 2012.

God needs your gifts.
God needs your kindness.
God needs your hope.
God needs your words.

The good news at Pentecost is that we don't have to have the meaning of it all figured out ahead of time.

The Holy Spirit is the One who gives meaning to our lives.
And make no mistake—the Holy Spirit is coming...for you!

Amen.