

“Geography”

Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost

June 5, 2022

Westminster, Greenville

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I may need some help with the sermon this morning. As I mentioned, I'm fighting a bit of laryngitis, so if my voice gives out, just want to give you fair warning that I may need to call on one of you to come up and finish the sermon.

No, I wouldn't do that. But I would like some help with the sermon. I'm going to ask you to do two things with the sermon, one at the beginning, and one at the end.

The first thing I'd like you to do is join me right now in saying the charge that I say at the end of every worship service. I know it doesn't belong here, it's a bit out of order, but my hunch if we say it together right now, you'll remember it...

Can you do that?  
Let's give it a shot.

**Go out into God's world in peace. Have courage. Hold onto what is good. Return to no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted. Support the weak. Help the suffering. Honor all persons. Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.**

That was good!  
Now why did I want you to do that?

I wanted you to say the charge with me because of the very last phrase. Do you recall the last phrase, the final words that we said?

“...rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.”

The power of the Holy Spirit?  
Have you ever thought about that before?

What are we talking about when we talk about the power of the Holy Spirit?

I raise the question because today is Pentecost.  
The birthday of the Church.

The day, according to Luke, when the Holy Spirit arrived, and came to the disciples “like the rush of a violent wind.”

“...at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?’

Parthians, Medes, Elamites,  
and residents of Mesopotamia,  
Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,  
Phrygia and Pamphylia...”  
the list goes on, but the point is clear:

The Holy Spirit can overcome any geography, any history, boundary, any difference to create God’s Church. That’s the power of the Holy Spirit! True back then, and true today.

Whether it’s a difference in how we grew up, or a difference in what we need out of our church, or a difference in political persuasion, or a difference in sexual orientation...

We all have our own “geographies,” if you will—places that we come from when we enter this room. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are UNITED as God’s people, because our first allegiance goes deeper than that which might divide us.

All of which raises a question in my mind:

**Is the power of the Holy Spirit strong enough to create community not just within God’s Church, but outside of God’s Church?**

I ask that question because there are other geographies on my mind this morning.

Buffalo. Uvalde. Tulsa.

It’s been an emotional roller coaster this past month, and one of the most common sentiments that I’ve heard in the news, on social media, even from other pastors is a sense of hopelessness and helplessness.

That nothing will ever change.  
 That our community is forever broken.  
 But I think Pentecost teaches us something else.  
 Pentecost says that we must never lose hope.

We must never lose hope that God will be at work—and through the power of God’s Spirit, God works through people just like you and me to create peace where there is violence, community where there is conflict.

Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to it as the “beloved community.”

He believed that the Holy Spirit could work through us, that we are “co-creators” with God, and that the beloved community could be formed not just inside these walls but outside these walls.

How does that happen?  
 Our texts for today teach us three things:

1. By listening. By listening to one another.

Sometimes, it's easy to think that the miracle of Pentecost was that the disciples SPOKE in many different languages, but Luke emphasizes something else:

**“How is it that we hear?”**

That's what those who were present at the birthday of the Church said to one another. They were astonished that they heard something that they never expected to hear!

Have you ever had the experience of hearing something you did not expect to hear, but in hindsight, you really needed to listen to what was said to you that day?

In one of her autobiographies, the late writer Maya Angelou describes the day when she was a brash, young student being instructed by an old professor named Frederick Wilkerson. Angelou was an intelligent student, but underneath her smart exterior there still lay the pain of a difficult childhood.

One day, Dr. Wilkerson handed Maya Angelou a book and said, “Would you read this to me?”

She read a section that ended with the words: “God loves me.” Her professor said, “Read it again.”

Angelou says:

“I was 24, very erudite, very worldly, and I said with great sarcasm, ‘God loves me.’”

“Again.”

“God...loves...me.”

Read that one more time.

“After the 7<sup>th</sup> repetition,” she said, “I began to sense that there might be truth in that statement...I knew that if God loved me...ME, Maya Angelou—

then I could do wonderful things.

I could learn anything, achieve anything.

...I suddenly began to cry at the grandness of it all.”<sup>1</sup>

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At that moment, Maya Angelou didn't need to speak.

She needed to listen.

She needed to hear something she had never heard before: that she belonged to God, that she was claimed by God, that she was a part of God's community!

Number one: the power of the Holy Spirit comes through listening.

And number two: it also comes through loving.

Not just loving the people we find it easy to love.

But loving the people we find difficult to love.

In our first text today, we heard Paul describe the fruits of the Spirit, and the first of those fruits is love.

Do you know the Greek word that Paul uses?

Agape.

Agape isn't romantic love or *philia*, friendship love.

Agape is loving when we don't feel like loving.

It's the highest form of love in Paul's mind.

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<sup>1</sup> Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now*, New York: Bantam Books, 1994.

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I heard a story recently about something that happened in the summer of 2020, not long after George Floyd was killed. It happened in the town of Cambridge, Maryland.

Cambridge is a city, like so many American cities, with a difficult past when it comes to its racial history.

At one time, it had a thriving African-American cultural and commercial district...but then in the late 1960s, there was a fire, and buildings burned in the Black commercial district. No knew how the fire started, but what was more horrible was that no fire trucks, no emergency vehicles, came to put out the fire.

They intentionally stayed away.  
And the district burned.  
And race relations went downhill.

Fast forward over 50 years. After the death of George Floyd, the City Council in Cambridge was approached by some local artists who wanted to paint a mural down one of the main streets in town.

The Council voted to give permission, and artists—both Black and white—painted a beautiful mural.

One night shortly thereafter, a truck was driven down that street when no one else was there. The driver drove with the intention of destroying the mural. The town woke up the next morning to find tire tracks and skid marks all over the paintings in the street.

Fortunately, one of the security cameras on one of the stores along the street captured the event, as well as the license plate of the truck, and the driver of the truck was identified.

The City Council contacted the primary artist of the mural, and invited her to repaint it...but she responded with a different idea.

The artist, an African-American woman, invited the driver of the truck to have a conversation, and he accepted. She told him what it was like to grow up as a Black person in Cambridge. And she asked him what it was like to grow up as a white person in Cambridge.

By the end of the conversation, the 21-year-old man who drove the truck apologized for what he had done, and he asked what he could do to make amends. He made a public apology, and then—he and his parents and the artist went to the mural, and started to paint.<sup>2</sup>

Now...did those actions heal every wound in Cambridge's history?

Of course not.

So why did she do it?

Why did the artist extend that invitation?

I don't know what the artist would say to that question.

I think I know what Paul would say:

Her actions were agape.

She shared the first gift of the Spirit.

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**Is there any barrier, any obstacle, any geography that the power of the Holy Spirit cannot overcome to create God's beloved community?**

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<sup>2</sup> For this story, I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston's sermon, "Chaff," preached at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, on February 13, 2022. The story was shared with Dr. Johnston by Dr. Tom Long, who lives in Cambridge, MD.

Throughout the book of Acts, the apostles had a habit of thinking that their new church community would look one way—and the Holy Spirit had a habit of always disrupting those plans.

The Spirit continually pushed boundaries, and forced the apostles to LET GO of their dreams in favor of God’s dream.

People whom the apostles never would have dreamed could be a part of God’s Church are continually invited by the Spirit to be a member of God’s Church:

Saul, the persecutor of the Church, in chapter 9.  
Cornelius, the Roman centurion, in chapter 10.

That’s the third way the Holy Spirit works to help build community. By asking us to LET GO...let go of our assumptions, let go of our plans—and be open to God’s dreams, be open to God’s plans...

In his book *Leading Without Power*, Max De Pree tells of the time that he went to visit Russia. This was over 3 decades ago, before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

De Pree is a Christian, and he wanted to go to church while he was there.

But it was an unusual experience.

What made it unusual?

Well, as De Pree describes it:

“Because of the restrictions on the opportunities to worship, the churches were so full that for many there was no place to sit. Stairways were full; aisles were packed.”



But rather than turn people away, something else happened in that church.

“The worshippers had worked out a wonderful system to make the crowding more bearable. During the service people would quietly get up and trade places...”

In other words, those who were seated would periodically stand and allow someone who was standing to sit.

“No one directed this procedure...” De Pree writes, “there was no commotion.”

And De Pree was amazed, he was astonished.

People weren't competing for seats?  
They weren't claiming particular places as their own?<sup>3</sup>

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How many of you are sitting in the same place that you usually sit on a Sunday morning? Not a big deal, because we've got this beautiful sanctuary with plenty of seats.

To celebrate the birthday of God's Church, I'm not going to ask you to give up your favorite seat in worship today.

I am going to ask you to help finish my sermon today.  
Help finish this sermon, not in here but out there.

What would happen if you did something this week to help build God's beloved community:

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<sup>3</sup> Max De Pree, *Leading Without Power: Finding Hope in Serving Community*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

by listening to someone you've never listened to before,  
by loving someone—someone you don't feel like loving  
anymore,  
by letting go of whatever it is that's getting in your way:  
your pride, your anger, a grudge,  
let it go...

And then watch what the Holy Spirit will do...

Amen.