

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church
Pentecost Sunday June 9, 2019
“We Do Not Speak On Our Own”
Genesis 1:1-5; John 14:8-17, 25-27
Rev. Michele Ward

The arrival of the Holy Spirit is flashy in the Acts version of the Pentecost story. We hear the story of the early Christians together, receiving tongues of fire on their heads, speaking and understanding languages that they couldn't previously, a rushing wind blowing through the room. Rev. Lenny Duncan, ELCA minister and author of the book *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the US*, says this about Pentecost in a recent devotional: “If you're like me, you love a good party. I'm not talking cake and hats or a quiet dinner with friends. I'm talking [about a] crazy ... night in the city where [things] get utterly out of control so quickly that at the end of the night, you have to ask yourself, *how did we end up here?* Where is *here?* It is raucous and feels dangerous. It feels like the moment when you have been waiting for a firework to go off. You end up in a place you've never seen with people you never met, yet instantly are in love with. That's Pentecost. It's the birthday of the church.”¹

Now, I imagine most of us love a good party, unless you're Ron Swanson from the sitcom *Parks and Rec* and do not want anyone to know about your birthday. But we don't get that kind of party in John's account of the Holy Spirit. That might be what we get in the book of Acts, but in the gospel of John, we do not have a loud party. We have an intimate, quiet promise. We have a description of what theologians call the 'indwelling,' or permanent presence, of the Holy Spirit inside of us, a promise that God's presence is already within us, guiding, encouraging, and advocating for us.

¹ The Rev. Lenny Duncan, “What the Hell is a Pentecost?” Our Bible App, June 7, 2019.

In fact, we are jumping in midstream to a conversation that Jesus is having with his disciples about what will happen when he leaves. In the first part of this chapter, Jesus tells them right off the bat not to worry. He explains to them that there will be a place for them and they have no need to be afraid of the future. They already know the way to get there, Jesus reminds them, because they know him. And in the midst of the disciples' anxiety about what will happen to them after Jesus leaves, he describes the third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Jesus uses a Greek word that we translate into English as paraclete. A Paraclete is a defense attorney, one who speaks for others, "one called alongside to help."² And although this word is typically used solely for the Holy Spirit, John slips in a keyword: the word *another*. John declares that the Holy Spirit is 'another Paraclete,' implying that Jesus is the first. Jesus is the initial advocate of the disciples and of all people, while the Holy Spirit comes second. No implication about the Holy Spirit needing to be a separate entity (via the theology of hypostasis, which argues for the distinct personhood and unity of the three persons of the Trinity). The personality of the Holy Spirit is to be a protector and defender of the people of God in the same way that Jesus does this for the disciples and for all of creation..³

Dr. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, expert on theologies of the Holy Spirit, writes, "While the paraclete acts as a defender of the disciples, his role is also that of a prosecuting attorney proving the world guilty ... the term carries several other meanings, such as "comforter," "intercessor," and "the one who exhorts and encourages." No single translation captures the complexity of the functions assigned to the Paraclete in John ... witness, revealer, interpreter, and leader into the truth."⁴ Karkkaninen is right. The word Paraclete is too complex for us to fully understand it. That is the power and mystery of the Holy Spirit. God created us with the Holy Spirit deep inside of us,

² TDNT, 6:442-44.

³ Karkkainen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective*, 25.

⁴ Karkkainen, 35.

‘indwelling’ within us. Jesus describes this relationship for himself, too, saying that God dwells inside of him and he dwells inside of God. What a powerful image of our relationship to God and to one another. We cannot avoid the interconnection of God’s self from our very cores. Jesus explains this to the disciples because they are full of anxiety about the future. They are worried about their own security. They want to know what will happen to them when they leave. They want to know what God looks like so they know what to expect. But Jesus does not spell it out for them, give them a detailed portrait, a scientific treatise. Instead, he tells them that they already know the answer. They already know what God looks like because God already lives inside of them. They know what God looks like because they know Jesus. And soon, they will know the Holy Spirit, the second Paraclete, who will come and continue this work of advocacy, encouragement, and defense. Jesus tells them that they will never have to speak for themselves as if they were entirely alone. Jesus will not abandon them to figure everything out when he goes. They will experience the Holy Spirit in such a profound way that they continue to grow in their understanding of God and the created world. They will develop a deep experience of peace, not of anxiety, with the coming of the second Paraclete.

Liberation theology takes a justice-focused approach to the Holy Spirit, moving beyond the peace that John promises with the Holy Spirit’s arrival. Liberation theology argues that the Holy Spirit shows up wherever a movement, a community, a person has an longing for life, a resiliency, a ‘never give up in the face of darkness’ kind of reality. In his book, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, Jurgen Moltmann argues that wherever there is a strong impulse for life the Holy Spirit is there at work: “So the essential thing is to affirm life--the life of other creatures--the life of other people--our own lives. If we do not, there will be no rebirth and no restoration of the life that is threatened. But anyone who really says “yes” to life says “no” to war. Anyone who really loves life says “no” to poverty.

So the people who truly affirm and love life take up the struggle against violence and injustice. They refuse to get used to it.”⁵

This weekend I experienced this kind of affirmation of life and commitment to justice through the art of Shan Goshorn, member of the Eastern Cherokee Nation and Baltimore native. I spoke at the Mid Atlantic Synod Gathering for Presbyterian Women this weekend at Massanetta Camp and Conference Center, and the gathering featured a tribute to Shan. She was the daughter of Edna Goshorn, a founding member of the Racial Equity Dialogue for the Mid-Atlantic Synod of Presbyterian Women. She passed away in 2018 at the age of 61 after a cancer diagnosis. Goshorn understood the power of what the Holy Spirit’s ‘indwelling’ looks like in her life and her art. She taught herself the Cherokee method of basketweaving, and rather than using traditional materials, she wove photos, maps, transcripts, treaties, and names into her baskets. One of her baskets is called “The Fire Within,” and it is shaped like a seven-sided Cherokee star. The concept reminded me of God’s promises in the gospel of John about our connection to God and to one another through the Holy Spirit. The seven sided star is the symbol used on the national seals for the three Cherokee tribes recognized by the US government. With this basket, Goshorn is “literally referencing the central Council House fire, the importance of which can not be underestimated. At the beginning of every new year in the fall, all personal family fires would be extinguished and re-lit from embers of this sacred fire which was always kept burning, symbolizing rebirth and tribal continuity, connecting our past to the future.”⁶

She tells the stories of her nation through weaving--through the interconnection of every piece of paper, every photograph, every sliver of map, every single story--in order to tell a greater story about

⁵ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 2-3.

⁶Shan Goshorn, “The Fire Within,” 2016, <http://www.shangoshorn.net/new-page-31>.

the people of the created world. None of us can escape the reality that we are woven together as people. God created us with the Holy Spirit deep inside of us, 'indwelling' within us. Jesus describes this relationship for himself and for the disciples and for us. The Holy Spirit moves us all from anxiety to peace, from paralysis to action.

Like the Council Fire Goshorn imitates in her powerful basket weaving, we light fires, too. Every Sunday, we light a fire. We light candles in our sanctuary to remind of us the Holy Spirit's presence with us. And we extinguish the fire once a year, on Good Friday, when we remember Christ's death. The fire that sits on our communion table, the fire that is on the heads of the disciples on Pentecost Sunday, the fire that burns within us--that fire is part of us. It is the Paraclete, burning within us, compelling us towards the future that God invites us to create. It is the Paraclete, burning within us, compelling us to step more fully into the justice and liberation of all people. It is the Paraclete, burning with us, compelling us to speak. Because we do not speak on our own, but with the power of the Holy Spirit. We do not speak on our own.