

“Pentecostal Power”

Acts 2:1-21

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Pentecost Sunday

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The winds howl, the tongues of fire descend - I can feel those Marvel-esque superpowers about to descend on those disciples so they can change the world! Send us that Spirit that can shake the rafters, blow through the streets, upend systemic oppression, clean house and our hearts. *Come on Holy Spirit*. We need that Pentecost superspreader event more than ever. But what does God give first to the church? Not superpowers. The disciples can't even change water to wine. The first gift of the Holy Spirit is the ability to hear and be heard. What a freaking disappointment. I mean, no offense to the counselors among us - I love therapy and all. I guess I just expected God to give us a little more than active listening skills.

I mean, Jesus, we've got big problems here. We've got war again in Israel and Palestine - The Netanyahu government with its winner-take-all, anti-peace strategy facing off against a terrorist organization that wants to see Israel eradicated. Bombs funded by our tax paying dollars in a world where anti-Semitism is arguably at its highest levels in my lifetime - we need help here, Jesus, to sort out this mess. We've got people dying by the thousands in India with people starving for a vaccine there and in other places around the world while we continue to fight our ideological battles here in what should be non-partisan areas of health and safety. We need help here, Jesus, to sort out this mess. There's shootings in our city every night, the helicopter seems always overhead, murders and overdoses go unabated and the city can't even keep up with cutting the grass or picking up the trash. We need help here, Jesus, to sort out this mess.

And God decides to give the church the gift of listening! How weak is that? The arrival of God in the world sometimes feels like the biggest disappointment at least according to the Christian story. I know we're not supposed to acknowledge this since our job as so-called believers is to try to convince other people that the Christian story is the greatest story ever told and one that *everyone* should be a part of, but allow yourself to freedom not to drink the kool aid for just a moment, and you might see what I'm talking about. The earth longs for a savior and God arrives on the scene as a baby. A baby can't do nothing about the world's problems. A baby born to an unwed teenage mother - we all know the statistics. Our first prophet isn't some truth-to-power speaker inside the halls of Jerusalem but a camel haired, cicada eating weirdo who preaches from the equivalent of like Dundalk or something - no offense to Dundalk, but who's gonna leave the center of culture to go there? Jesus' best friends are maligned women,

tax collectors, and sinners. His disciples don't have ivy league degrees. They fish for a living. We're promised a Savior who will change the world and he ends up tortured on a cross, killed with common criminals. We're promised a church who will receive a Spirit to enable us to be transformed and to transform the world and God gives us active listening skills.

Don't strike me down for saying this but it's almost like Jesus lied to the disciples right before he left. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." That's what I'm waiting for from the Spirit - *power to change*. Power to change the death spiral of our shrinking city. Power to change the planet-killing practices of our economies. Power to change the centuries old fights among human beings fought out on the battlefields of our religions, or our economic oppression, or our ideological wars, whether hot or cold. I'm waiting for that power to descend out of the heavens and onto the right crowd of people who can take their good and correct politics and replace all the terrible stuff that we've lived through, or need to clean up from - years and years of unjust human arrangements birthed to give so much to the few while so many suffer, divided by race and clan and religion and gender and disability.

When it comes to the church I often think that we need less listening and more action. Something bad happens in the world - a mass shooting, a racist policy deepening inequality, another war ignited by divisions we fail to address and the church offers "thoughts and prayers" when we should be taking to the streets. That's the criticism and it often fits. But there's another critique that fits the church and anybody who wants to make change, just as well. That is that we take action before we ever listen to people whose lives we've already judged as to what they need. The church based a global missions strategy Nearly entirely on that stance for a time. We know what you need in fill-in-the-blank foreign land, and we're going to come and bring it to you before we've ever listened. Liberals sometimes do it in foundation board rooms and political think tanks. The self-designated smartest people in the room who may have never experienced poverty, never had to heat their house off the gas-fired oven, never had to choose between buying my medicine or food for my kids, come up with blueprints for how to change other people's lives and then set out to do it having never listened. And we do it to each other in the church - "What he really needs is X." "What she really needs is Y."

Sometimes we offer thoughts and prayers when we should be in the streets. But other times we act without listening. In fact this very division between listening and action betrays just how little we understand about change, about our humanity, and about human relationships and what actually leads to transformation for ourselves and for others.

Listening and action aren't opposite poles - they are dependent on each other. The whole reason that people go into the streets - people who want more than just to appear virtuous or on the right side of history - the whole reason people go into the

streets is so that other people wake up to what's going on. Wake up to the police brutality, or wake up to the climate crisis, or wake up to unjust treatment of immigrants. All that action is dependent on people listening, taking note, so that we all can find change together. There is no change without listening of some sort and kind which is probably why the Spirit gifts the church with listening at the very beginning. This divine gift of listening is the prerequisite for every powerful action that the disciples will take throughout the book of Acts when disciples encounter difference. Gentiles and Ethiopian eunuchs And outsiders who want to be baptized into a faith that the disciples thought was only for Jews. Those early disciples listened first to the people their encountered with the holy gift of listening that the Spirit gave them to engage the other with grace instead of fear, with openness instead of judgment.

That's the whole challenge that humanity has to deal with at this moment in time: are we going to relate to our differences through hearing and being heard or through coercion and control which eventually leads to violence?; violence through policies and systems or through fist fights and guns. It might not be any different from any other moment in time. The gift to hear and be heard is the foundation for all change. How can I as a white man who grew up in white suburbia ever hope to understand what my Black sisters and brothers face in encounters with the police or racism in the workplace if I can't listen to people's experiences that are different from my own? How can I understand what a child is facing in her struggles to become herself if I can't listen deeply enough to hear her pain? How can I understand how to change the future of our planet if I can't listen to how my actions here influence the degradation of the rain forest far from my home? And how could I ever become part of anyone else's dreams to change the world if they don't understand my own story - the pain I've lived through, the journey I've traveled, the demons I've faced, too?

Of course the fear of really listening deeply to each other is that we might only see the signs of death everywhere. Death is easy to believe in Baltimore in the early part of the 21st century. It's everywhere. Cancer, murders, drug overdoses, demagogues, capital insurrections, deadly viruses. We've got rats in the streets and in the suites and we all know it. When we listen to each other - it's easy to fear that death is the single refrain that runs through all of our stories.

I should know. It's part of the listening that I do for a living. I hear the pain of people's childhoods - pain experienced a thousand different ways - abandonment, betrayal, unfulfilled dreams. I listen to people in neighborhoods east and west - abandonment by families, and governments, and neighbors and friends. I listen to people in deep grief over death - literal and figurative - all the time. Death is real and easy to see.

The fear of listening too deeply is that death might be all that we find. But if we were listening to God, or at least to the story that the church has been given about God all through our sacred texts, the promise of new life would be ringing in our ears. We'd

notice that the resurrection story in Ezekiel - the rise of the people from out of their exile and pain - that story is given to us over and over again, not just in the texts of our Bible, but in the text of our lives. The promise of new life for our city, the promise of a new creation already at work healing the planet we are still on a pathway to destroy, the promise of new life for you and me in the painful places. If we really listened we would see the promise of Easter morning renewed a thousand times in all the crucified places that are so evident in our world, as if God knew we would have so much trouble believing it, we'd need to hear it again and again.

We've got to learn how to listen. Because if you trust the words of Acts, the problem with the world and the problem with the church isn't that God has neglected to give everything that is needed for change. Prophecy is given, dreams are shared, signs of God's saving the world are as prevalent as the stars on a clear night, and the power to heal happens. The problem isn't that we're lacking the right people, or the right dreams, or the right direction, or the power to make it all happen. It's all here around us. The problem is that we can't always hear the grace and goodness among us; we can't always see the pathway toward justice right around us. We don't always hear the pain in ourselves or others, or the pathway to heal it. But the pathways are there. The power is present. Listening unlocks the map to find our way.

The seeds for life are planted right alongside the death that we see. The seeds for peace are right there among the people experiencing war and fear. The seeds for resurrection are right there among the people who are living through the crucified life - the drugs, and the grime and the broken politics, and the pain. The seeds are right there. The only way to see them and water them is to listen. Because when we listen, we can hear the dreams, we can see the visions, we can observe the hope that miraculously, God plants deep in each soul.

That's the gift of the Spirit - not the gift of dreams and visions - they're already a part of each of us. The gift of the Spirit is to be able to hear them in yourself, in your neighbors, in those who are living through death of various kinds in the world. Listening to each other.

And while listening **does** have to lead to action if it's going to be real, all action taken without listening is a dead-end road. Every justice movement that ever got legs started by listening to dreams planted deeper than the death that is so easy to see in the world.

A recent article in the Atlantic makes the observation that as we emerge from this pandemic time, what happens now will have the most significant impact on our collective mental health. "When you get a chance to realize that your safety or your family's safety is no longer at risk, one mental health expert said, you think, 'What was this experience like for me?'" And how we deal with each other as we sort through this meaning-making time will determine whether some of us move through grief toward health or whether we get stuck there. The problem, another psychologist noted, is that

the American way of dealing with pain is more often through heroic individualized resilience or by numbing ourselves through consumption.¹

There is another way. Perhaps it's so obvious as to seem insignificant. It is the gift that God gives the church at the very beginning of the church's story. The gift that God believes is at the root of all real power for change. It's the gift of listening - across our differences.

Take time to nurture it. Practice it. Participate in it. Give and receive it. A see just how deeply the world - and you - can change and be changed by this God of grace who is in the business of resurrection.

¹ Ed Yong, "What Happens When Americans Can Finally Exhale," *The Atlantic*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2021/05/pandemic-trauma-summer/618934/>