



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Gift of Understanding

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 31, 2020

The Feast of Pentecost, Whitsunday

Based on Acts 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

We really cannot hear one another.

Fifty days after Easter, Christians traditionally celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit, which the Book of Acts describes as falling upon the disciples like “tongues of fire.” “The disciples were all gathered together in one place” (just as we all long to be gathered together in one place someday!) and the crowd, “amazed and astonished,” asks, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?”

We celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the church because it's a celebration of that sacred moment when the Holy Spirit, like “a violent wind,” inhabits a small band of believers and, in an instant, blows into a movement that spreads throughout the world. We celebrate Pentecost because it reminds us of the spiritual gifts God gives us to understand one another and to be a unity in the midst of diversity.

Yet, this morning, “fire” is a difficult metaphor for us to use. “Fire” has a very different connotation today as the smoke of burned-out buildings and vehicles rises in the aftermath of riots from one end of the country to the other. The smell of tear gas and pepper spray blows over Minneapolis, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Louisville, Denver, Washington, DC, and New York, just to name a few, and we do not know yet if we have seen the end of the violence and the destruction.

We really don't understand one another.

How, when a nation is still reeling from a pandemic that has taken 100,000 lives and when its economy is still reeling as a consequence, do we find ourselves in this moment? Why this? Why now? Well *because these incidents just keep on happening*. I had a boss who once told me, “Once, is an accident. Twice, is a pattern. Three times? Well, now that's a habit.”

We have a systemic, habitual pattern of treating people of color differently than we treat people who are white in this country, and this disparity becomes clearly illustrated in the area of law enforcement.

According to NPR, “The rate at which black Americans are killed by police is more than twice as high as the rate for white Americans.”ⁱ

- Amaud Arbery, killed by 2 white vigilantes while jogging through a suburban neighborhood. He was mistaken for a thief.
- Breonna Taylor, a decorated Emergency Medical Technician in Louisville, working two jobs, was accidentally killed in her bed by police officers in a botched drug raid. No drugs were found.
- In a non-violent, but no less potentially dangerous incident, Christian Cooper, an African-American bird watcher right here in Central Park, asks a white woman to place her dog on a leash as required by law, only to have her report to police that there is “An African-American man threatening (her) life.” Unfortunately for her, Mr. Cooper videoed the entire episode.
- And finally, George Floyd, taken into custody in Minneapolis for allegedly passing a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill, had his life taken by police kneeling on his neck and back, despite his pleas that he could not breathe. He is not resisting. Filmed in graphic detail, the episode is extremely difficult to watch—and impossible to explain or justify.

Now each and every one of these situations, like the thousands of incidents which preceded them in our country, are absolutely unique. There are nuances, degrees of culpability, exceptional contexts, and extenuating circumstances. In the end, however, there is no doubt that there are three dead citizens who should be very much alive, and, added to a history of lynching and police misconduct which goes back to the earliest days of our nation, one begins to see an undeniable pattern.

We really can't hear one another.

Now, three out of four of these particular situations were videoed on cell phone cameras, that ubiquitous device found everywhere in modern America. (I don't know about you, but I can't walk down Fifth Avenue without being filmed by a tourist wanting to prove that he or she is actually standing right here in New York City! They are SO excited! I mean, if there were no pictures, how would anyone know for sure?)

But in these cases, the cellphone, just like the Coronavirus, doesn't change things, it simply *reveals* them. If there were no pictures, how would anyone know for sure? Video evidence is graphic and hard to refute. The image of a man slowly being killed while in police custody, without offering resistance, should shock every person of faith out of our denial.

The policemen cannot hear him.

The image of a white woman, clearly in no physical danger, accusing a black man of attempted assault is also haunting video watching because it recalls other violence in our national psyche. Emmitt Till, a 14-year-old Mississippian, was lynched in 1955 based on a false accusation by a white female witness. His death made him an icon of the civil rights movement. The woman in Central Park could not understand a thing Mr. Cooper, a Harvard graduate, had to say. That now-familiar phrase, “I can't breathe,” first uttered by Eric Garner who died while in a policeman's choke-hold, is a metaphor for a judicial system, a prison system, a healthcare system, and an economic system which does not give sufficient “air” to African-Americans and to other people of color. Slavery, and its violent offspring of inequality and injustice, are our nation's original sins.

They deafen us. They help us be unable to hear voices different from our own.

Now, please allow me to say that it has never been harder to be a police officer in America. The danger for those appointed to keeping the peace is very real, and, if you have any doubt about that, note the rocks, fireworks, and firebombs being tossed at police officers across the nation over the past several nights.

We cannot hear them.

Martin Luther King, Jr., in a speech at Stanford University in 1967, said, “Certain conditions continue to exist in our society, which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality and humanity. And so, in a real sense our nation’s summers of riots are caused by our nation’s winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again. Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention.”ⁱⁱ

In the 53 years since Dr. King delivered that speech, the fundamental issues he raises have never been more present or more real. If “a riot is the language of the unheard,” then the Holy Spirit remains a reconciling power. It allows people of different races, tribes, and languages to hear and understand each other. “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

We hear them; we hear them.

The Reverend Sam Wells, Vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London, observes, “In this moment, in Trinitarian terms:

- God, the Son, the Christ is suffering. Christ is on the ventilator. Christ is the one in custody. Christ is the one in pain and desperately gasping for breath.
- God, the Father, God, the Mother, is outside in the waiting room, and feeling absolutely powerless, perhaps unable to visit the Son, who’s protected by all sorts of equipment.
- And, God the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is all the people caring for the person in the emergency room: the nurses, the doctors, the med techs, and perhaps even all the people making it possible for society to continue to function around-the-clock—the store clerks, the delivery workers, the truck drivers, the firefighters and the police officers.

When you’ve seen this, then you’ve seen our whole society. All of us are one of those three. That is the incarnate triune God who takes up the mantle of our humanity.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Wells continues, “If you ask a person in the congregation when they felt closest to God or when they felt God was closest to them, they do not say, ‘We reached the final four of the regional hockey contest and my boy was selected to be on the all-star team and he ripped up the opposition and when that third goal went in I knew the Lord’s hand was upon him.’ They never say that. They say, ‘We were in the emergency room and she just squeezed my hand and I felt she was saying, “Sing to me.” And I sang, ‘I need Thee, O I need Thee,/ Every hour I need Thee!/ O bless me now, Savior,/I come to Thee.’ And I felt her squeeze my hand back and I knew God would take care of her. That’s what they say every single time.”^{iv}

And that is my experience as well. We don’t hear; we fail to understand. We are divided by race and history and language, but we are united by a loving God who has not left us comfortless. And we can be a church that helps people—all people—to listen and to understand. As our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry,

writes, “Our long-term commitment to racial justice and reconciliation is embedded in our identity as baptized followers of Jesus. We will still be doing it when the news cameras are long gone.”

The author of John writes, “Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.” (His wounds were still visible.) “Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you.”

Peace. Peace. That deep peace that passes all understanding. The peace that blows through a room like a violent wind. The peace and the quiet that allow us to *both hear and to understand*.

Amen.

ⁱ National Public Radio, “A Decade of Watching Black People Die,” NPR.org, May 29, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Martin Luther King Jr. Stanford University Speech, “The Other America,” 1967, as quoted in *USA Today*, May 29, 2020, by Joshua Bote.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Reverend Samuel Wells, Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes Webinar, “Preaching in a Pandemic,” May, 2020, CEEP.org.

^{iv} Ibid.

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