

“Not Just Another Birthday”
May 31, 2020—Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21

Noted preacher, Fred Craddock, tells the story of the first church he served in the eastern Tennessee hills, not too far from a town called Oak Ridge. When Oak Ridge began to boom on account of atomic energy, that little town became a booming city overnight. People came in from everywhere, pitched tents, and lived in wagons. Men wearing hard hats were all over the place, with their families and children paddling around in the mud in nearby trailer parks. Everything was set up in a hurry to accommodate the influx of workers.

Meanwhile, our church was not far away. We had a beautiful little church...white frame building, one hundred and twelve years old. The church had an organ in the corner, which one of the young fellows had to pump while Ms. Lois played it. Boy, she could play the songs just as slow as anybody.

The church had beautifully decorated chimneys, kerosene lamps all around the walls, and every pew in this little church was hewn, hand hewn, from a giant poplar tree. After church one Sunday morning I asked the leaders to stay. I said to them, “Now we need to launch a calling campaign and invite people in those trailer parks to come and join us in church.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think they’d fit in here,” one of them said. “They’re only here for a short while, just construction people. They’ll be leaving pretty soon.”

“Well, we ought to welcome them, make them feel at home,” I said.

We argued about it, time ran out, and we said we’d vote next Sunday. Next Sunday, we all sat down after the service. “I move,” said one of them. “I move that in order to be a member of this church, you must own property in the county.”

Someone else said, “I second that.” It passed. I voted against it, but they reminded me that I was just a kid preacher and I didn’t have a vote. In any case, it passed...

Years later, when we moved back to these parts, I took my wife to see that little church, because I had told her that painful story. The roads changed. A big interstate goes through that part of the country, so I had a hard time finding it, but I finally did. I found the state road, the country road, and the winding gravel road.

There, tucked among the pines, was that building shining white. It was different. The parking lot was full—motorcycles and trucks and cars packed in wall to wall. And out front, there was a great big sign; *Barbecue; all you can eat.*

It's a restaurant, so we went inside. The pews were against a wall. They had electric lights and the organ was pushed over into the corner. There were all these aluminum and plastic tables, and people sitting there eating barbecued pork and chicken and ribs—all kinds of people. Locals, tourists, families with little children, older folks, construction workers, rich and poor, different races, Parthians and Medes and Elamites and dwellers of Mesopotamia; all kinds of people.

I looked over the crowded former sanctuary and then turned to my wife. And I said to Nettie with a wink, "It's a good thing this is not still a church, otherwise these people couldn't be in here..." (1)

"No matter who you are or where you are on your faith journey, you are welcome here..."

On the day of Pentecost, people streamed into the city of Jerusalem from all over the Ancient world. Thousands of people, all in one place. And as they were sitting there, a mighty wind blew among them and divided tongues of fire appeared on them and a tongue rested upon each of them.

The whole place was filled with smoke and fire! And it wasn't a barbecue. Some of you know as well as I do that there's nothing like the smell of good barbecue that's been smoking in a pit or on a grill or over an open fire for hours on end. The chicken or the ribs or the brisket or whatever you like.

I digress... On Pentecost there was smoke and fire and tongues and people amazed and astonished. And all of a sudden, by the power of the Holy Spirit, everyone who was there realized they could speak in other languages. And understand other languages. Holy Smoke...literally!

Some of the people at this extravaganza thought it was an incredible, full throttle party. And others figured most of the crowd was simply drunk. Even though it was only nine o'clock in the morning...one big Coffee Hour gone off the rails, I suppose...

But the disciple Peter stood up and tried to explain. He quoted from the Old Testament Prophet Joel. And basically, what Peter said was all people have a place in God's realm. Young people and older people. Sons and daughters. Slaves and free persons.

Nothing Peter said made any distinctions or drew any lines. He didn't say only the people who owned property in Jerusalem would be saved and be a part of the church. Peter said everyone. People just passing through. And people who never left...

Peter didn't cover all the bases on the day of Pentecost. But I think I can fill in the blanks he left out. Peter was talking about people who were born and raised in this country and people who came into this country to escape violence and persecution. He was talking about people who are raising children in traditional families. And people who

are single parents and foster parents and adoptive parents and queer parents and transgender parents.

Peter was talking about people who are grieving and people who are protesting and outraged by the injustice of black men and women being targeted and killed for no other reason than their skin color. They are welcome. Men and women and young people who are addicted to alcohol and opioids and other drugs. They are welcome. Older people confined to nursing homes where COVID-19 continues to loom as an ominous threat. They are welcome. And children with special needs struggling to learn and thrive online and outside the classroom. They are welcome.

If you adhere to and practice a different faith, you are welcome. And if you practice no faith at all, you are welcome. If you are fully physically able, you are welcome. And if you are disabled in any way, you are welcome. If you feel completely healthy or you struggle with physical or mental health, you are welcome. Your politics, your profession, your personality, your perspective, your pipedreams...it doesn't matter. According to Peter, who heard it and saw it and learned it firsthand from Jesus, all people are welcome...

You know, originally, the sermon I wrote a few days ago moved toward its conclusion right at this point. It was a sermon about who is welcome and how we are called as a Christian church to welcome one another in the midst of this pandemic and beyond.

I liked that sermon I wrote a few days ago and there is a place for that sermon. But I cannot preach the ending of that sermon this morning. Because I woke up this morning the same way I woke up the last couple of mornings. Reading and watching images of what's going on across our nation. Today may, in fact, be known as the birthday of the Christian church. Yet, today is not just another birthday.

You and I and hundreds and thousands and millions of other people in our country...we're not gathered in the same place this morning. We may not be anywhere near a church building. If we're sitting on our couches or out on the deck this morning, we probably won't hear the sound of a mighty wind. Except if we hear the chants of the protestors marching up and down city streets. And we won't feel the heat of tongues of fire rising up around us. Unless we see images of burning cars and buildings. And we won't see any smoke, save for the smoke that rises when tear gas and flash grenades are fired.

This morning large portions of this country are literally on fire. And so many people in this country are speaking different languages. We are speaking the language of lament, especially with communities of color, wondering why black men and women continue to be killed brutally and unnecessarily at the hands of those with power. We're speaking the language of anger, wondering why systemic racism in this country is pervasive and so degrading. We're speaking the language of confusion and anxiety, not sure how we got here when we've been patting ourselves on the back for how far we

thought we'd come in terms of race relations as a nation in the past decades. We're speaking the language of helplessness, looking for ways we can do something to speed the wheels and the work of justice. We're speaking the language of alliance, coming to terms with the privilege granted to many of us merely on account of our race. We're speaking the language of prayer, hoping God can find a way to lead us out of the chaos and the confusion towards some measure of understanding and healing.

Or maybe, we're too tired to speak. We don't know what to say. We've run out of words. We'd rather just weep...

By the time this worship service is over, it will be almost nine o'clock in the morning. And you and I and people across this nation will be looking for some kind of meaning. We need Peter to stand up and help us. We need Peter to speak.

I'm waiting for Peter to stand up and call on God's name. I want Peter to tell us about the just, righteous, inclusive, amazing love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ. Or maybe I just want Peter to stand up and say their names.

George Floyd. Ahmaud Arbery. Breonna Taylor. Tony McDade. And so many other brothers and sisters killed needlessly and senselessly. I want Peter to speak their names this morning, lifting them up to God, remembering the lives they lived, grieving along with those who loved them best, and trying to forge meaning out of their heartless deaths...

Today is Pentecost and maybe you didn't realize it when you woke up, but today is a special day for Christian people of faith. And even in the midst of the fire and the smoke and the chaos, today remains a day for trusting that the Holy Spirit is hard at work. Giving us breath to breathe. Binding us together. Helping us to save one another and ourselves.

Hopefully, prayerfully, angrily, diligently, vigilantly we will call on the name of that Holy Spirit. Yes, we speak different languages. But together we seek the peace and the justice and the understanding only the Holy Spirit can provide.

We need the power of the Holy Spirit to blow among us and rest upon all of God's children this day...and in the days ahead. Amen.

(1) The Rev. Dr. Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1981) pgs. 28,29.