***Lutheran Church of the Epiphany***

***Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York***

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*The Day of Pentecost A –May 31, 2020*

*Acts 2:1-21 Psalm 104:24-34, 35b*

*I Corinthians 12:3b-13 John 20:19-23*

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*  ***AMEN***

What does it look like to be people of Pentecost, to be those claimed by the Spirit? On that day when Jesus was resurrected and he joined the eleven remaining disciples in the room where they had shared a last meal with him, at first they looked like they were filled with fear. But once he had appeared in their midst, had said, “Peace be with you,” and had shown them his hands and his side, they rejoiced. This is John’s description of the disciples’ post-resurrection receipt of Holy Spirit.

Luke’s telling of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in Acts is much more animated; much livelier; in fact, it is **thrilling**. Here there were 120 of Jesus’ followers in a house in Jerusalem, where they had been waiting since he had left them ten days before when he ascended. (Acts 1:15.) They had just asked God to select a replacement for Judas Iscariot, who had taken his life after betraying Jesus. (1:21-26.) Then, the violent wind blew through the house and divided tongues of fire rested on each of them and appeared among them and they began speaking languages they had never spoken before. (Acts 2:1-4.) Can you imagine it? I’m not sure that I’m quite up to the task.

They must have gone out of the house, because suddenly they were surrounded by a **huge** crowd of people who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Weeks, commemorating God giving the law to Moses, and giving thanks to God for the year’s harvest. The many names of their homelands, although **familiar** to us, mostly are not meaningful because they’re ancient. But there were people from present-day Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Libya, Greece and Italy; an area of more than 1500 - 2000 miles, in all directions, north to south and east to west.

This was the fulfillment of Jesus’ promises to them, back before he was arrested, and then again before he ascended from their midst. They now had a **new** Advocate to accompany them; they had power to be witnesses of the resurrected Jesus, the Messiah, in word (in any language) and in action, to the **entire known world**.

And, in the midst of what must have sounded like chaos, Peter the fisher heard the skepticism of some in the crowd, accusing them of being drunk. Suddenly, he began to preach, powered by Holy Spirit. The crowds listened to him and were touched by his message, to the extent that 3000 multi-ethnic Jews repented of the abandonment of Jesus fifty days earlier by the Jews of Jerusalem when they shouted, “Crucify him!” They presented themselves for baptism and became followers of Jesus. (Acts 2:41.) It’s hard to tell the size of the world population at that time, but that baptismal group might have been proportional in size to close to half a million people today.

On this day, Holy Spirit transcended multiple layers of differences to accomplish God’s many purposes by doing a completely new thing. The **disciples** – followers of Jesus – now were **apostles** – representatives of God who were charged with proclaiming the gospel. Their ability to carry out that mission came to them by the gifts of the Spirit: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracle working, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues and interpretation of tongues. (1 Cor. 12:8-10.) **All** of the Jesus followers are gifted – each differently, but all are empowered to carry out their own ministry, rather than some being called to ministry, and others being ministered to because they were skipped when the gifts were bestowed. No, God didn’t leave out **anyone** when spiritual gifts were given.

Through the Holy Spirit, the apostles (those of both the first and the twenty-first centuries) receive the fulness of the glorified Son so that our lives can accomplish the same kinds of things that Jesus did during his earthly life – or even greater things – which he promised would be the case. (John 14:12). So, we are called to bring to the world not only the hope of the Gospel, but also the healing of the world, sometimes through miracles, sometimes through teaching, explaining, communicating, or prophesying. So today we celebrate how we, as Christians, are uniquely equipped to respond to the illness, brokenness, despair, anger, pain, and death (from disease, disaster and human destruction) that characterize our world these days. Jesus says, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit.” Are you ready to go to work?

And it sounds like Jesus has one more job for us. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” This sounds at first blush like we’re all in the confession and absolution business. But “sin” in John’s gospel is not about moral failings. Sin in John’s gospel is failing to recognize or embrace the revelation of God in Jesus. To have sin then, is to remain estranged from God. So, through the Spirit that enables us to bear witness, we can set people free or release them from that condition of estrangement. Our translation uses the word “forgive” for setting free or releasing. We do that by testifying to God’s work in the world and in our lives.

If we **fail** to bear witness to Jesus, the opposite will occur: the world will be full of people who are unable to grasp the knowledge of God. Their sins are “retained” because they are unable or unwilling to receive Jesus as the revelation of God. So, if **we** don’t bear witness to Christ, we make ourselves **a church unable** to play a role in delivering people from what keeps them from experiencing the fullness that Jesus offers.

I was comforted to come to this understanding as I plunged into commentary on this verse, because the events of this past week in our country left me feeling that I might not be able to function as a follower of Jesus, because I didn’t feel forgiving toward some actions taken by some people in our country. I couldn’t understand a great deal of the behavior I was hearing people were carrying out this past week. **Why** were people so intent on going to get their hair cut or out to dinner or to hang out in crowds at the beach or a bar when their doing that might well result in yet more people – including themselves – acquiring the coronavirus and maybe being very ill or even dying, when we’ve already experienced more than 100,000 people losing their lives in the US?

Also, **why** do so many “white” people in this country think that they are justified in terrorizing or taking the lives of people of color – or just feeling “entitled?” The continued actions of police and people who think they have the authority of police, in taking the lives of others or threatening to do so, left me completely at a loss. The most recent people to suffer were Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and Christopher Cooper, And the violence that has followed this week in more than a dozen cities in response to those depraved actions has just enlarged and expanded the devastation we are facing. And it has increased the chance of the virus spreading further, too. When I first reread Jesus’ words about forgiving the sins of others distressed me because I didn’t feel forgiving toward any of these people regarding their actions – at least not right now. I had thought that it would be quite a job for the Holy Spirit to bring me around!

But this different understanding of forgiving and retaining sins invites me into whole-hearted apostleship. Proclaiming Jesus as God the Son certainly **is** within my ability, especially with the power of the Holy Spirit working within me. For this recognition I am heartened and energized, and I give thanks to God! I pray that others find meaning, energy and a sense of call in it, as well.

What does it look like to be people of Pentecost, to be those claimed by the Spirit? It looks like the church of Christ in every age: multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-generational, etc., all called, gathered and sent; yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Let’s pray. Dear God, help us to recognize the spiritual gifts you have infused us with, so that each of us can live out our role in the community of Christ, strengthening the church on earth and helping us to reach others who are not in relationship with you in Jesus. And assure us, since we know that you have called us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown, that you will give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love is supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.  AMEN