

A New Community from Frayed Edges

Acts 2:1-21

Chris Currie

First Presbyterian Church, Shreveport, Louisiana

Here is the scene: flaming tongues of fire coming to rest on the gathered throng, creating a situation that begins to take on a life of its own. The whole community is filled with the Holy Spirit, enabling them to speak in languages that were not their own, and to be understood by people gathered to Jerusalem from a multitude of ethnic and national backgrounds. No dominant racial group, no language or culture exercising domination over another, but room is miraculously made in Jesus Christ and the community he forms by power of the Holy Spirit. From the beginning breaths of the Holy Spirit, the church of Jesus Christ is not a cultural church or a church of one nationality or race or class or interest group, but a missionary church, an alien church, a church that does not submit to the lordship of one particular culture or race or national or regional religious cult, but only to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

The early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was not in itself a reason for the Christian community to receive attention or disdain from Rome. It was the implication of their confession and their way of life indicated not only that Jesus was Lord, but that Caesar was not Lord. The crucified, dead, and resurrected Jew from Nazareth transcended the strength, might, and domination of Caesar and Pax Romana. The historian of church mission Andrew Walls reminds us of what is right before our eyes in this passage from Pentecost, that Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Judeans, Cappadocians, Asians, Africans, Arabs, and yes Romans were already part of Israel and the church's mission by virtue of their belief in Jesus Christ, and "did not require the accompanying markers of the law, nor any other cultic or purity signifiers."¹ More relevant to our own time, perhaps, he then makes the following point: when the gospel of Jesus Christ is reduced to one dominant nation, ethnicity, and cultural form, Christianity dies and cannot be revitalized from within but only by what he calls a "cross-cultural diffusion." "Every threatened eclipse of Christianity [has been averted]," Walls reminds us, "by [a] cross-cultural diffusion. Crossing cultural boundaries has been the life blood of historic Christianity."²

From its beginning, the church of Jesus Christ is a community that at its best is not representative of one single nation, ethnicity, or race. And when the church becomes less than its best, defining the gospel of Jesus Christ according to the norms of one nation, one race, and one establishment identity, it is at risk of losing its vitality and its witness. Again, here is the scene: flaming tongues of fire come to rest on the gathered throng filling them with the Holy Spirit, enabling them to speak in languages that were not their own, and to be understood by people gathered to Jerusalem from a multitude of ethnic and national backgrounds. Out of the chaos of many heartlands, homelands, and racial hues, the tongues of fire forge a community tethered together in Jesus Christ that transcends everything else.

Here is the scene: flaming tongues of fire coming to rest on the gathered throng, creating a situation that begins to take on a life of its own, as it laps at and subsumes an abandoned police precinct building in midwestern Minnesota—nice Minneapolis.

People gathered to protest the unjust killing of an unarmed black man in the streets of Minneapolis by a local policeman as his colleagues stood and watched. Protestors possibly mixed with and were bated by outside agitators in the streets more than happy to take advantage of the problems of race in the America of 2020 and to stoke the fires of hatred, chaos, and distrust. These are the flames of fire that greet us this Pentecost, these are the flames of fire that we cannot turn away from, and these are the flames of fire that threaten to engulf us. Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, in a recent statement on the death of George Floyd puts it this way:

For centuries our white dominated society has systemically made it so hard for blacks to breathe fully. Systems of oppression manifest in marginalized neighborhoods where children grow up with severely limited opportunities and boundless reasons for despair, in disproportionate rates of incarceration, and as we just saw again, in some being shot or strangled by those who took an oath to protect them.

Barnes continues, “As a white [person], I cannot fully understand or know the depth of pain that this creates. But I can acknowledge my own complicity in these systems, and join with black siblings in Christ who have had to fight far too long for justice and dignity.”³

One of my favorite Taize’ chants that we often sing in Taize’ worship goes like this: “The kingdom of God is justice and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, come now, and open in us, the gates of your kingdom.” But the kingdom of justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit cannot include an ideology that excuses, ignores, or justifies killing unarmed black men in the name of law and order. When we lived in Scotland, we had some neighbors who were serving as Christian missionaries in China, and the wife, herself Asian-American, recently reminisced about a trip she and her family made to attend a special organ recital in London at Westminster Abbey, on of all days, Pentecost, and the piece being played was a contemporary organ piece inspired by the Pentecost story in Acts. She recalls that she “briefly noted the organist’s name—something typically English and male (hidden from view high above us, playing). At the end of the amazing, passionate playing, we all looked up to see the organist emerge to take his bows, and to [her] great surprise, a young black man popped his head over the edge and grinned to the congregation. And in that moment,” this Asian-American woman writes, “I had two very quick realizations—1) I had automatically been expecting to see an old, white man, and 2) I was racist for being surprised that he was not.” She recalls that it was not a sin of omission as much as ignorance. She assumed her narrow, biased view of who could participate in the world of great church music in distinguished places would only include a certain group of people. She confessed that she had not taken the trouble to learn about who truly is writing and playing and creating this music right now. She recalled a sense of surprise and delight at being wrong. “[And] I hope I will continue to be delighted to have planks taken out of my eye.”⁴

Here is the scene: Flaming tongues of fire come to rest on the gathered throng in a situation that begins to take on a life of its own. The church of Jesus Christ has always been at its best not when it walls itself off from the problems, trauma, and its own complicity in the racism of its host culture, but when it listens to the voices of

the unheard, stands with those who suffer at the hands of injustice, and works and voices public support for the dignity and fair treatment of every human being. One of my favorite sayings about the church comes from an Anglican, the Archbishop of Canterbury during the 1940s and ecumenical leader for the larger church, William Temple. About the church, he says, “The church is the only society on earth that exists primarily for the sake of those outside of it.” The purpose of our being here at all as a church, he reminds, argues, and maybe challenges us, is not primarily for our own edification, but primarily for the sake of those outside of our walls, outside our community, and outside our fellowship. We exist for them.

Pentecost gives us the gift of the Spirit not just to certain individuals, but to all creation. To be filled with the Spirit is to be able to breathe fully, to be able to realize our God-given purpose, vocation, and calling in this world, and to work for changes in society that ensure that more people of color, more people who grow up in poverty, and more people who are warehoused in our system are given opportunities, openings, and on-ramps to become creatures fully alive, fully able to breathe, fully able to offer God their best.

The second century theologian and church father Irenaeus declared that the “glory of God is a human being fully alive.” It is not enough to chase after that for ourselves or only for those close to us. When black members of our society are limited at the start in their breaths, when we turn our eye to a system that does not work to ensure that everyone has good opportunities to breathe fully, we risk not only limiting their breaths, but we risk thinking that their breaths are not our problem or that we have responsibilities only for ourselves and our own spiritual edification. In doing so, we risk losing, sacrificing, and forfeiting our reason for being as a church. To be the church is to exist for the sake of those outside of the church; to be the church is to be filled by the Holy Spirit so that we are sent, commissioned, and given the task to work that all members of our community are treated with dignity and have every opportunity to fully breathe, to be fully alive, and to reflect the glory of God.

2020 is turning out to stand on quite the eschatological precipice. We are living in a fragile ecosystem. A bat bites a pangolin, and before long hospitals are overwhelmed with people who cannot breathe. A police officer doesn’t let up on a black man who cannot breathe, and we realize we all have some complicity in a society set-up to limit his breaths. But it is often in times like this when the church awakens to its particular task and particular responsibilities in this particular moment, entering into the frayed and ash-covered edges of our society, helping to form a new community, fully alive and fully able to breathe. Now more than ever, come Holy Spirit.

Notes

1 John Flett, “The Calling of Witness,” in *The Witness of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 283.

2 John Flett, “The Calling of Witness,” in *The Witness of God*, 283.

3 Craig Barnes, “Statement on the Death of George Floyd,” Princeton Theological Seminary, May 29, 2020.

4 From Heather Kaiser, Taiyuan, China.