

Pentecost Sunday A  
Peace, Seattle  
June 4, 2017  
Acts 2:1-21

## **TRANSFORMED FOR GOOD**

Sisters and Brothers, grace, mercy, and peace from God who has calls us into community and energizes us for mission in the world. Amen.

**THEY'RE DRUNK!** That's how the **cynics** in the crowd described what they witnessed in Jerusalem that morning. **INTOXICATION** was the only explanation that made sense to them.

**The Spirit of God—the Spirit Jesus had promised, the Spirit his disciple community had been waiting for—came swooping down on the wings of a mighty wind, transforming the cacophony of a dozen languages into one united chorus in praise of God.**

**The power of God was afoot! Not in drunkenness, but in wind and flame; in vision and dream and sound.**

**God had released the Paraclete, and the effects were instantaneous:**

- A new language was born, whose grammar was grace, whose syntax was praise, whose dialect was unity.
- And new ears were issued, allowing pilgrims to hear and understand one another as never before.

**This Pentecost story is a story of transformation.**

**A story to which the church keeps returning again and again, year after year, age after age.**

**Why do we keep coming back?**

**(1) Perhaps we come because we yearn for the raw power of that first Pentecost experience.**

- We yearn for the wind and the flame to come storming into our lives and our communities,
- to blow and sweep and burn away all the fear and sorrow, the failure and disappointment, all the perplexing problems for which there are no easy solutions.
- Oh! To feel that wind in our faces, to be touched by that Power as they were touched!

**(2) Or maybe we return to this story because we're hungry for a new beginning.**

- Maybe what once worked in our lives, doesn't work any more.
- Maybe a dream that once held us holds us no longer, and we're ready for a new direction.

**(3) Or maybe, with so many voices vying for our allegiance, we come to this story looking for wisdom that will settle the tug of war; a compass that will lead us back to solid ground.**

**How do you come to this story this morning? What are you looking for?**

**There are many reasons for returning to this story year after year, but beneath them all is this:  
We want this story—we need the story—to come true in our lives and in our time.**

**For it's becoming more and more clear that instead of opening our ears to the voices and experiences of others, we are becoming deaf to those who don't share our point of view.**

**Instead of finding common ground we're losing ground, becoming more fractured, more suspicious of those who don't resemble us; or who speak a language other than our native tongue.**

Many observers have written about this growing reality in our nation and world. Whether this is a hiccup or a long-term trend remains to be seen. But for right now, it's clear that the tenor of national conversations has degenerated to the point where hate mongering, racist rants, and bullying speech are becoming normalized.

**The tragic incident that unfolded on a lightrail train in Portland last weekend is a case in point:** In full public view a man verbally assaults two young women of color, one of whom was wearing a headscarf.

Incidents like this are happening more and more across the country as rhetoric that once lurked in the shadows or in the recesses of closed internet chat rooms has crawled into the light of day.

Such hate speech, which asserts its right to trample the rights of others, must never be normalized; must never be deemed worthy of protection.

If there is a counterpoint to such expressions of hatred and incivility, the other riders on that Portland train witnessed it in the persons of Rick Best, Taliesin Namkai-Meche, and Micah Fletcher.

Instead of looking the other way when they heard the man unload his vitriol, these three rose to the defense of those young women. They stood up to the bully and as a result, two of them paid with their lives. A lot has been written about this incident—and will continue to be—for it illustrates both the worst and the best of what it means to be human.<sup>1</sup>

So much in this story has prompted tears in me. But nothing more readily than the image of Taliesin, the young Reed College graduate, who had something to say as his life bled out, a message he told the woman who sat with him as he died: I WANT EVERYBODY ON THE TRAIN TO KNOW, I LOVE THEM.<sup>2</sup>

When light like that shines in such a dark place, when selflessness, like that of those three men shows itself, we are reminded of why we're here; and life itself is elevated.

**Some of you have followed the story out of New Orleans about the removal of statues that memorialized leaders of the Confederacy.**

New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu was a strong advocate for their removal, and he gave a speech last month explaining why they must come down.

His speech should be required reading for every civics course in America...and for the rest of us, too.<sup>3</sup>

**Please bear with me as I share a portion of what he said...**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/three-men-stood-up-to-anti-muslim-taunts-two-paid-with-their-lives> Columnist Nicholas Kristof sets the events on the Portland train within the context of American politics as a whole in his opinion piece published in *The Seattle Times*, June 1, 2017: <http://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/on-a-portland-train-the-worst-and-best-of-america/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2017/05/max\\_heros\\_last\\_words\\_tell\\_ever.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2017/05/max_heros_last_words_tell_ever.html)

<sup>3</sup> Martin Marty wrote about Landrieu's speech in his INSIGHTS blog, found here: <http://mailchi.mp/uchicago/martin-e-marty-religio-secular-again-213529?e=e34cddfc96> Landrieu's full speech can be found here: [http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/05/mayor\\_landrieu\\_speech\\_confeder.html](http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/05/mayor_landrieu_speech_confeder.html)

The mayor began by telling how the soul of his beloved City is rooted in a history that's evolved over thousands of years; and in a diverse people, beginning with Native Tribes and added to by both free and enslaved peoples from Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and more recently South East Asia.

New Orleans, he said is “a bubbling cauldron of many cultures which so eloquently exemplifies the uniquely American motto e pluribus unum—out of many we are one.”

But there are truths about this heritage we must confront. New Orleans, Landrieu points out, was America's largest slave market. “A port where hundreds of thousands of souls were bought, sold, and shipped up the Mississippi River to lives of forced labor, of misery, of rape, of torture.”

“A great nation,” said the mayor, quoting a speech given by President Bush at the dedication of the African-American History Museum in Washington DC, “does not hide its history. It faces its flaws and corrects them.”<sup>4</sup>

“These statues,” the mayor goes on, “are not...innocent remembrances of a benign history. [They] purposefully celebrate a fictional, sanitized Confederacy; ignoring the death, ignoring the enslavement, and the terror that it actually stood for.” “After the war they were erected purposefully to send a strong message to all who walked in their shadows about who was still in charge in this city.”<sup>5</sup>

“In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, asking African Americans—or anyone else—to drive by property that they own [which is] occupied by reverential statues of men who fought to destroy the country and deny that person's humanity seems perverse and absurd.”<sup>6</sup>

“We should stop...and ask ourselves—at this point in our history—after [hurricanes] Katrina...Rita...Ike...Gustav, after the national recession, after the BP oil catastrophe... if presented with the opportunity to build monuments that told our story...would these monuments be what we want the world to see? Is this really our story?”<sup>7</sup>

**According to the book of Acts, change catalyzed by the Holy Spirit that day was immediate. But 2000 years of history since have shown us that complete conversion of human wills and human behavior is a long-term enterprise. Still, this story has something to teach us.**

**For on Pentecost the age-old categories** which have divided human beings into camps for millennia: race, nationality, gender, economic status—**all fall away**, and in their place what the baffled and joyous people hear coming from each other's mouths is not hate speech, nor rant—nor anti-anything—but rather voices of every size, pitch, and timbre PRAISING GOD as one.

**On Pentecost, a new kind of community is coming to birth**; with a new definition of what it means to be human, a spirit-filled and spirit-led identity that breaks through walls instead of reinforcing them; that bursts old wineskins, and sets hearts ablaze.

**In a miracle of the ear, they hear and understand each other as they never have before. In a miracle of the tongue, they find new ways to articulate what they have in common, rather than what keeps them apart. This is the trajectory God invites us, compels us, to take in the world.**

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<sup>4</sup> Quotes in the sermon are taken from Landrieu's speech, found here: [http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/05/mayor\\_landrieu\\_speech\\_confeder.html](http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/05/mayor_landrieu_speech_confeder.html)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

**And for a case in point, look at Peter! Just look at him!**

**The one who, only weeks before, had dropped his relationship with Jesus like a hot potato—has been reborn! The Spirit has captured the old fisherman hook, line, and sinker!**

He's a new man now, led by the Spirit to stand up publicly and offer a new frame for understanding the experience they all share.

Under the nose of Empire, a new movement is a foot; a sub-version of history is being written, a counter-narrative to the dominant storyline. And the rest of the Book of Acts will tell the story of how this new charter for community life takes root—in spite of the opposition's desire to stomp it out.

**And what about us? What does it mean for you and I, for this congregation, to respond to the Spirit's call in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

**Take a look with me at this Trinity that's been with us now for the last three months.<sup>8</sup>**

When searching for language to describe the relationship between the three Persons of the Trinity, the term some early Fathers of the church came up with was "perichoresis"—"peri" = around; "choresis" (the root of "choreography") = dance...so a ROUND DANCE.<sup>9</sup>

**What then happened on Pentecost?** The Trinity reached out in a new way to show us that the Divine life, the choreography of giving and receiving, the rhythm of loving and including and making room, which has always been central to the Trinity, is intended for us, too!

The Dance of the Trinity is not closed but open! And all of us and all creation are invited in.<sup>10</sup>

We get a taste of that Dance every time we come to this Table. We practice the steps of the Dance every time we make room for the other, every time we reach beyond our comfort zones to engage with those who come from a place and experience different than what we know.

**It's not automatic, this Dance.** We have to work on the steps over and over and over again. But the Spirit is an amazing partner. And oh, so patient, and giving, and forgiving.

**This is what we celebrate today!** That in spite of all that's wrong with the world, the SPIRIT remains with us, calling us to love, calling us to be with and for each other, coaxing us to get on our feet and to try the steps of the Divine Dance one more time.

♪ ***"When you send forth your Spirit, we are renewed, we are renewed..."***<sup>11</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Follow this link to see the Dancing Trinity art installed at Peace Lutheran Church: <http://www.peacelutheranseattle.org/?p=2598> Design by Laura Bermes.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Rohr. *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*. (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2016)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Sing the refrain line from Ray Makeever's setting of Psalm 104, inviting the congregation to join.