

Acts 2:1-21
Pentecost Sunday
May 31, 2020

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

Today was to be a joyous celebration here in this space, as each Sunday ought to be as the body of Christ gathers in worship of our Lord and Savior. We were to be present with two amazingly wonderful and gifted youth as they affirm their baptism (or get confirmed). It was to be a day they gather with their families and all who have journeyed thus far with them on their walk of faith. Today marked in some ways a new beginning for these two; however, each time we return to the font we are given a new beginning and day full of grace as we are washed in the righteousness of Christ our Lord. Our sinful nature drowned. New and clean hearts uplifted as the Spirit-filled bath of life flows through the crevices and cracks of our brokenness. Pentecost was the ideal, if not perfect, Sunday to celebrate with Auron and Chloe but that celebration will have to wait until it is safer to gather in-person.

It seems I am not in much of a celebratory mood, which saddens me and fills me with a sense of guilt. This Pentecost seems so vastly different. The Greek word *pentecoste* means “fiftieth day.” Pentecost is a Jewish festival of thanksgiving for harvested crops observed 50 days after Passover. The Christian church celebrates Pentecost 50 days following Easter. Yet, it is another number that has me a bit weary and not so festive this morning – 77. That is how many days have passed since the last time we gathered in this place. I want to jump and shout, but as I deliver this sermon in a cell phone with no one else in this space I am yet again reminded of the loneliness I feel in doing so. I long to gather in-person; however, also know I must set aside my desires and wants for the safety of our community, which I realize there will be differences among us on when that time is, what it will look like, and how it will be carried out when the time comes to once again worship in-person.

But there is yet other numbers weighing me down - 101,711ⁱ (As of May 29, CDC) and 367,288ⁱⁱ. The former is the amount of deaths due to COVID-19 in America and the latter the number of deaths across the globe and we know there are many more yet to come.

Sadly, one other number has gripped me all week. It has gripped a community and a nation. 8...46. 8 minutes and 46 seconds we watched the life of George Floyd be taken from him. Every last gasping breath, plea for help, come to an end before our very eyes. Another black life whom God breathed life into just the same as you and me, just the same as God did to all tribes, nations, and people speaking a multitude of languages that first Pentecost in Jerusalem. Another black life joins the names of an unnecessary and tragic list that includes Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Trayvon Martin and many others.

These are numbers that haunt us all. They are numbers that certainly do not coincide with God's plan for creation. They are numbers that run contrary to the biblical witness of a God of life and love, a God of new beginnings, a God of restoration and redemption, a God of justice and mercy, and a God that welcomes all people. It is the story we see in Acts.

I suspect the number 50 had become somewhat of a challenge for those first disciples and so many others including women as the first chapter informs us. I wonder if they too were in a non-celebratory mood that first Pentecost as they huddled together in prayer. 50 days since Jesus' death and resurrection. Waiting for the long-anticipated Spirit Jesus had promised. Waiting in fear. Waiting possibly in doubt. Waiting in uncertainty. Waiting for direction on how to proceed. Waiting for the water of the Spirit to come and be poured out upon their dry bones, aching souls, troubled hearts, and possibly even guilty consciences for the likes of Peter who betrayed Jesus or the others who had abandoned him as he took his final breaths on the cross. I wonder if they were not asking, "How long, O Lord?" "How long must we wait for the Spirit to descend upon us and bring healing to our deeply wounded bodies?"

It is a question so many are asking today. "How long O Lord until we can return to in-person worship?" "How long O Lord until we are freed from this Corona virus?" "How long O Lord can we be freed from the masks upon our faces?" "How long O Lord until justice is served?" "How long O Lord until another life is taken all too soon?" "How long O Lord will the virus of hatred, racism, prejudice, bigotry, anti-Semitism, and all the other "isms" that separate, divide, oppress and dehumanize so many continue to exist in our communities, nation, and the world which you created and love so dearly?" "How long O Lord until your Spirit comes?"

Yes, like you, I am struggling today. Yes, like you, I am sickened by what I watched play out over the span of 8 minutes 46 seconds. Yes, like you, I long to bring an end to 77 and start anew at 0. Yes, like you, I cringe and grieve for 101,711 and 367,288 and pray and hope we don't see 101,712 or 367,289; however, I know by the time I finish this sermon we already will have.

Yet, as I have pondered it these last few days in my non-celebratory state of mind, I am more aware this Pentecost Sunday, more so than any other that have preceded it in my nearly 47 years of life, I desperately need Pentecost Sunday. I need to be reminded that the Holy Spirit is present. I need to hear the story of God's celebratory action that took place that first Pentecost. I need to sit with those disciples in prayer and behind closed doors for 50 days and feel the same rush of the Spirit filling the cracks and crevices of my parched body with the river of life. I need to see yet again the beautiful portrait of life God paints as God gathers all people that first Pentecost. This is the joyous miracle of this day as Keri L. Day notes, "Pentecost was about the *miracle* of community, the community across differences that was made possible through the work of the Spirit. Miracles sit at the center of this Acts narrative."ⁱⁱⁱ Miracles manifested out of the act of divine love. Right now, we need Pentecost and the transformative power of divine love to move us beyond division and to listen and hear our

brothers and sisters distraught. The miracle of Pentecost and power of the Holy Spirit allow us the ability to do so and overcome all that separates us as Day further writes:

The joy of Pentecost is that it gives us a vision and hope for a community made possible through the work of the Spirit. This miracle involves being open to the shocking and surprising ways of the Spirit, which empowers us to reach across differences in order to experience radical and insurgent communions.^{iv}

So, we will celebrate this morning! We will rejoice for the redemption brought through the cross of Christ! We will dance for joy in the light that shines on the once dark tomb of Easter morning! Indeed, this is a day full of grace and shortly we will sing the words that mark our joy and make this day celebratory, even amidst the hurt, heartache, and anger we experience. These words are the vision of the world that can be made possible through cross of Christ, empty tomb of Easter and the work and presence of the Holy Spirit. These words are the miracle of grace that fill the cracks and crevices of sin that lie within each of our hearts with the water of love and life that flows forth in endless song. Hear those words:

O day full of grace that now we see appearing on earth's horizon,
bring light from our God that we may be abundant in joy this season,
God shine for us now in this dark place; your name on our hearts emblazon.

God came to us then at Pentecost, the Spirit new life revealing,
that we might no more in death be lost, its pow'r over us dispelling.
This flame will the mark of sin efface, and bring to us all true healing.^v

Embedded in these beautiful, poetic words and the other verses of "O Day Full of Grace" not included above is yet another number and it is the number that comforts, sustains, forgives, heals, and is the source of all our hope and joy – 3. The relationship we dwell in of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The number of days until which the light of life cast aside the darkness of death. The impossible made possible. This Pentecost, "will we allow ourselves to be open to the impossible gift of community now made possible through the work of the Spirit?"^{vi}

ⁱ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Keri L. Day, "We need a Pentecost", https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/we-need-pentecost?code=L3KOKeb9JyWm29hbO2Vj&utm_campaign=40775698cb-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_09_11_08_32_COPY_08&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-40775698cb-86122403

^{iv} Ibid.

^v *O Day Full of Grace (ELW 627)*; Text © 1978 Lutheran Book of Worship, admin. Augsburg Fortress. Used by permission under OneLicense.net A-726405 streaming license.

^{vi} Ibid. Day, "We need a Pentecost?"