
Pentecost is now!
Martin Grove United Church
June 9, 2019
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 2:1-21 and John 14:8-17, 25-27

So I guess it must be pentecost today. What else could it be given those hymns and those readings. Pentecost - whoopee!! Are you excited? Are you feeling the spirit? Are you ready to see - and even better do - something you could never have imagined before? Are you ready to - in the words of the hymn - set the church on fire!

Or perhaps you don't really understand what all the excitement is about. The story we just read in Acts about pentecost was something that happened 2000 years ago, and to be honest it sounds a bit funky anyway. I mean seriously, given the description of having the spirit descend and having everyone go crazy, how accurate do we think that story even is? Perhaps it's like when Rev. Paul says that this week's sermon will be fantastic, but that may not be your experience. As they say, "your mileage may vary". Perhaps at pentecost the crowd was drunk on cheap wine after all.

Or perhaps when you heard the pentecost story you are actually scared. I mean what on earth was going on? How would you have felt if you'd been sitting there, enjoying your coffee, and then all that pandemonium broke out? Personally, I think I would have been terrified and I would have found the door as fast as I could have. Pentecost was scary! Pentecost still is scary!

For me, the importance - lack of unimportance - of pentecost can be determined with 1 simple question. Here it is. Is pentecost something that happened 2000 years ago, or is pentecost something that happens today - in the here and now? If you think pentecost only happened 2000 years ago then perhaps you don't see the point of this annual celebration that to be honest is not really that celebratory. I mean we don't even get cake after the service. If that's what pentecost is about then I would agree that it's a bit pointless. I should just preach about the meaning of the latin words embedded in the word "pentecost", perhaps tie it in with some Jewish traditions that don't fit anyway, and go for my coffee - completely surrounded by no cake.

But I don't want a coffee right now. I'm still fully-charged with espresso. So I suppose we will just have to endure with the theme that pentecost is something that happens in the present and just muddle along. But already I'm stumped, because I'm not sure what it even looks like. What would pentecost look like today? From the story from Acts, it sounds like 2000 years ago we would know it's pentecost because of the vivid description, "Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among the people, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." Is that what pentecost would look like today? Or perhaps more to the point, is that what engaging the spirit looks like?

I'm going to argue no. And yes. 2000 years ago, the spirit caused people to speak their truth - in different languages, and the people were shocked. Today, I think the pentecost experience is when people speak their truth - in whatever form makes sense today. Perhaps in a speech. Perhaps in a sermon. Perhaps in a tweet. The thing that makes it pentecost is that people need to speak their truth while others are trying to hide from the truth. Pentecost is about speaking truth to power because sometimes speaking truth is more important than not upsetting people. Pentecost is about speaking truth to power. Pentecost is about speaking truths that nobody wants to hear because denial is just so much easier. Pentecost is about speaking truths that people already know to be true but we resist the message anyway. But where do we hear such voices today? Where are these voices that speak truth to power? Where might we find the voices of pentecost today? I'm glad you asked! I have a few options for your consideration.

Our first candidate is Greta Thunberg, the 16 year old Swedish climate activist who is energizing the planet by speaking about climate justice. And it's not just about lightbulbs with her. Greta believes that the climate crisis is also a justice crisis, and that our salvation will only come when we respect and value equally all human life. She believes that small-minded me-first thinking has created the climate crisis. She believes that buying and building things will not solve a crisis created by buying and building things.¹ She believes that our planet is being sacrificed so that a small number of people can make stupid amounts of money. She is an inspiration not only because she speaks

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFkQSGyeCWg>

truth, but because she herself struggles with asperger syndrom, OCD, and selective mutism. And in spite of that, and her age, she has done far more to inspire climate justice than the allegedly “most powerful person on the planet”.

Is Greta one of the voices we hear at pentecost? Does Greta share the voice of the spirit with us? I hear someone objecting that she is annoying - just a child after all. Well, what sort of messages do you expect to hear at pentecost? A boring, bland message that is irrelevant to us? Or an inspired, focused message that we actually need to hear about climate justice. Greta satisfies the first requirement of a pentecost voice - she shares a message we don't want to hear - and we don't want to hear it because we know she's right. Greta is bringing pentecost to the climate debate.

Our second candidate is Ilhan Omar, a member of the US congress. She is helping to expose the massive racism and xenophobia that exists within the US Government. In her short time in office, she has already figured out why the establishment hates her. I quote, “the establishment can't stand that a refugee, a black woman, an immigrant, a Muslim, shows up in Congress thinking that she is equal to them.”² She believes that the US needs to become a country of the many, not a country of the few. Omar works to ensure that the US will not be a country of xenophobes. Omar is upsetting people who believe in the old boy's network, exposing hypocrisy and double-standards. Most recently, she is challenging the laws of Texas (and other states) that have now made abortion punishable by death. She argues that the Texas laws - if they were happening in other countries, would be labelled as violations of human rights.³

Does that feel a bit like the spirit? Uncontrolled and uncontrollable? Taking us to places where we have been trying to avoid going? But again, did you seriously expect the spirit to push you in the direction you were already going? Of course the spirit is going to lead us to places that we - initially - find uncomfortable. Omar is bringing pentecost to the US congress with a message that nobody wants to hear because they all know that she is right. Am I starting to make you uncomfortable right now? Good - because pentecost is now!

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YOAjdsZkHg>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ID6zZsJ055s>

Our next candidate is Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand. The youngest female world leader, the 3rd female prime minister of New Zealand, the 2nd elected leader in world history to have a baby while in office. After the Mosque shootings at Christchurch which killed 51 human beings, her leadership style has caught the world's attention. After the shootings, Ardern responded with what I can only describe as a very pastoral presence in her community. But she offered more than her sympathy. Unlike in the US where after a pointless mass shooting all you get is being in the "thoughts and prayers" of the leaders, Ardern's government got the National gun laws changed to ban semi-automatic weapons less than a month after the tragedy. When Donald Trump asked what he could do to help, Ardern told Trump that the best way to help New Zealand was for him to show sympathy and love for Muslim communities.⁴ She also is fighting xenophobia which has traditionally been very strong in New Zealand. Ardern and her government have created a national budget that includes a section labeled "well-being" that includes funding to address child poverty, domestic violence, and mental health. Ardern has declared that there is a huge cost associated with ignoring mental health and related issues. Ardern has used an act of hatred to create opportunities for love. Ardern is bringing pentecost to New Zealand.

Again - I wonder why people - perhaps including some of us sitting here - think that the spirit would come in ways that do not challenge us to change? Do we seriously expect anything called "winds of fire" to come and say, "you're just fine the way you are"? No. The spirit is here to help - but that doesn't mean that we get to just coast. Pentecost is always about change.

Our last candidate this morning is Rashida Tlaib (tah-eeb). Tlaib is also a US congresswoman, and a woman, a Muslim, and a person of Palestinian descent. She is bringing a voice of justice out in to the open in particular around Human Rights in many areas. Perhaps her most provocative statements are around how we need to support Human Rights instead of just picking a side when it comes to divisive issues. Being Palestinian, she is constantly harassed by people who want her to pick sides and to say something that can be twisted to sound anti-semitic, but she is fighting for equal human

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMX2NT4Sa2A>

rights for all, including both Palestinians and Israelis, Muslims, Jews, and everybody. She encourages people to pick a value, not a side. For this she has - regrettably - received death threats. One note she received said, "I was totally excited and pleased when I heard 49 Muslims were killed and many more were wounded in New Zealand. This is a great start. Let's hope and pray that it continues here in the good old USA. The only good Muslim is a dead one."⁵ That note was copied by the sender to the US department of Justice, homeland security, and the president. The person who sent the note was not arrested.

Tlaib is speaking for Human Rights and believes that there can be no justice in Israel as long as they continue to kill Palestinians with impunity. Tlaib believes that there is no such thing as justice for one, there is only justice for all. But that is a message that many Americans do not want to hear, because they know it is true. Tlaib is bringing pentecost to the US.

So those are my 4 candidates for today. I'm sorry that my list was inadvertently sexist. I don't know why the most prominent voices speaking truth to power seem to be from women these days. I did check the most dominant male voices too you know, but between Trump, Trudeau, and Ford, I just did not hear any of them speaking truth to power. But I would love it if we all shared our own stories over cake - I mean over coffee - of voices we have heard recently of speaking truth to power. Because that is where we will find pentecost today.

So let's bring this home now. Where is the voice of pentecost here in Rexdale? What voices do we hear that perhaps are unwelcome to our own ears precisely because we know that voice to be speaking truth? Where is it that we ourselves need to speak the voice of truth to power ourselves? Where is it that we ourselves can be the voice of pentecost today?

Pentecost is now!

Amen.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ss9f5xSgBV8>