

“Speaking Out”
The Rev. Beth Hennessy
May 31, 2020

It's such a joy to be with you this morning. Especially today, Pentecost Sunday, where we celebrate the birth of the church. The beginning of journey together as a family of God sharing Christ's message of God's love.

I don't know about your family but in mine we love to tell stories, particularly on special occasions like birthdays and anniversaries.

I grew up in a family where every year on our birthday my mother would tell our birth story. Mine was especially exciting I, was the baby of the family, I was 3 weeks late in arriving. After taking a dose of castor oil prescribed by the doctor, my mother made a fast trip to the hospital where I made up for lost time and was practically born in hallway!

For my children, who are adopted the stories are a little different but none the less significant. I tell them every year with great affection, even though as they say they have heard it a million times. When our son, Matthew, was born, we were in the hospital hallway with the social worker right outside the delivery room. We suddenly heard a baby crying and after what seemed like an eternity our son's biological grandmother appeared, threw her arms around me and said to me "You're a mommy". We were then allowed into the delivery room and as his birth mother handed him to me she smiled and said congratulations! It was indeed a grace filled moment.

With our daughter it was that same sense of awe when a social worker called me on a cold February morning to tell me that a baby girl had been born in South Korea that would be our daughter. She had been born on December 18th – my birthday. In May, just a few days before Mother's Day, we made the trip to the Detroit airport and met our bouncing, 4 month old Sarah. As I took her in my arms and Bill and I talked to her, she looked at us with a discerning, wondering eye. When she looked down to see her new brother beaming up at her she broke into a big smile and I knew we were a family.

Stories are important. They bond us together, they tell our truths, both good and bad. They remind us of our roots and from where we came. The birth story of the church is no different. It is the story of ordinary people being brought together for a new purpose, a new relationship to be part of the birthing process of the church – a new model that will shake the status quo. It's inclusive, diverse and expansive. It's a story of finding our voice and speaking out.

Let's revisit our story...
As the book of Acts 2 opens, Jesus' followers are gathered in a room where they have been staying and praying together. The apostles are there, with Jesus mother and brothers and the rest of the disciples, including women who were supporters and followers of Jesus...about 120 in all - as we are told in the previous chapter of Acts.

I want to take a minute here to point out the significance of the women present at Pentecost because it shows the inclusivity of both Jesus ministry and followers as well as the early church. The book of Acts is an extension of the book of Luke where women are named and highlighted more than any other gospel. It makes sense then that Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna and others would have been present for this gathering and receiving of the gift of Holy Spirit that would allow them to preach the teachings of Christ and spread the love of God. They paved the way for women in the early church Priscilla, Phoebe, Chloe, Lydia and others. We lift up their names and speak out their stories for the sake of the women to follow and the true message of inclusivity of Christ's church.

So, now comes the exciting part of our birth story. That moment of birth filled with promise, hope and new possibilities. The rush of wind fills the entire house, tongues of fire rest on each one present giving them the ability to speak and be understood in other languages. They are amazed and bewildered. It is such a radical moment. You see, those living in the Roman empire had a common language of Greek. It was the language expected to be used for day to day living and business. The speaking of one's native language was not accepted.

The empire expected uniformity in language as well as belief. Wherever Rome expanded - temples were built showing Caesar as the divine ruler. Rome wanted control. Control of people, language and faith. But the Holy Spirit comes in and blows away the empire's hold on uniformity and theology.

These disciples are now able to be understood in many different languages. The message of the gospel is available for all to hear. Their native languages are affirmed, their identities are affirmed, their true selves are affirmed. As one scholar puts it – "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy spirit did not discriminate; instead the Holy Spirit breaks apart the cultural assumptions about who can get the Holy Spirit and who can preach it." They are empowered to speak out, sons and daughters alike, in a language of love, mercy, compassion and inclusion.

We have a pretty amazing birth story. But what does it mean for us today? Birthday celebrations are a time for telling our stories and are also an opportunity for looking back and reflecting on our life story so far...what we've gotten right, what we are proud of, the values we maintained but also for honestly looking at what we got wrong. As we look over the history of the Christian church, we have much to be proud of and also much for which to repent. We have contributed to society, built schools and hospitals, been a part of movements to change people's lives for the better and spoken out for those without a voice. But if we are honest, we have also benefited from and supported beliefs and systems based on racism, antisemitism, sexism, homophobia and economic inequality. If Pentecost is going to have any real meaning it has to be a time of reflection of where we as a church have been and more importantly where we are going. What kind of world are we hoping to live in? What do we want the future of our church or our society to look like? We are facing some tremendous challenges right now. We are dealing with a global pandemic that has taken nearly 100,000 lives in our country alone. We're seeing a rise in white supremacy and racist attacks on our black brothers and sisters causing death and despair. Our environment has actually thrived during the quarantining of humans but still remains perilously close to

devastating irreversible damage. And there are still children in cages languishing without their families or proper care.

How do we tap into the spirit of hopefulness and new possibilities that Pentecost offers during these challenging times? First, we never forget that even though our doors are closed and we are physically distanced we are still a church and a community of faith, followers of Jesus doing the work of God's kingdom. We rely on the Holy Spirit that brings life out death, hope out of despair.

As we witness the growing gap between the rich and the poor, racial and religious prejudice, historic rates of unemployment and rising deaths from Covid 19, lack of national leadership, and growing intolerance of any opinion or ideal other than that of the empire, we can look to our roots in Pentecost and get glimpses of the work of that Spirit is calling us to do. As our Brief Statement of Faith says "In a broken and fearful world the spirit gives us the courage to hear the voices of people long silenced and to work with others for justice, freedom and peace.

We can again feel the blowing of that fresh and life-giving spirit empowering us to speak out. To speak out with love, compassion and inclusion for the needs and rights of all God's children.

Amen