

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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“When [Jesus] had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (John 20:22) Christ’s statement stands in sharp contrast to what we’ve heard this week. The world does not echo Christ’s vision, but rather, we heard the pleas, the gasps, and the belabored words saying, “I can’t breathe.” Parker J. Palmer reminds us that these words are the words that give voice to the terror that has haunted black Americans since the founding of this country. “I can’t breathe” were the dying words of George Floyd as a police officer kept a knee on his neck until his body lay lifeless. “I can’t breathe” might have been the dying words of over 100,000 victims of COVID-19 in America.¹ Yet, into a gasping world, Jesus breathed on them and said “receive the Holy Spirit.”

So too, in today’s reading from Acts we heard that all were filled with the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit. For, “suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.” This is the quintessential Pentecost image— that

¹ https://www.facebook.com/parkerjpalmer/posts/10157316646222078?_tn_ =K-R

is, a wind-blown room of disciples with flames on their heads. Here, fire and wind are connected with the breath of the Holy Spirit. But, the important part is not that there *was* wind or fire; in fact, there might not have been. You see, the sound was *like* violent wind and varied languages spread *as of* fire. The author of Acts gives us an analogy for the movement or the spread of the spirit. It's not about the presence of fire or the wind; rather, it's about how fire and wind tend to operate. And, we know how quickly air moves when the wind blows. We know how fast fire can spread seeming to jump from one thing to the next. But, today is less about wind and fire and more about the rapid movement of the Spirit.

And, you and I, we are becoming experts in how fast things can spread. The coronavirus in the air can quickly be swept into our lungs or expelled from our lungs bringing about infection and possible death. Racism has spread in institutions, governments, and churches so quickly that it has become normalized, accepted, and worshiped. The spark of distrust and secrecy can light a fire of misinformation that no censoring can extinguish. Frustration, rage, anger, and fear quickly consume and engulf our lives like fire and wind.

Yet, the Spirit's movement is particular. After all, the author of Acts is likely the author of Luke, and Acts is the second part of Luke's story which shows us how the

resurrected Christ continues to live on as the Spirit in Jesus's physical absence. The Spirit quickly comes to spread the message the Jesus spread in his ministry. And, if you remember, Jesus is precise about his ministry in Luke's gospel. Jesus began his ministry by recalling the cry of God's people for ages— a cry from the prophet Isaiah. In Luke 4, Jesus shared with those in the synagogue that "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). Do you remember that? To understand Act, we need to remember Luke. We need to recall that "the poor" are those of low social status, the outsiders, and those who cannot breathe. We need to remember the good news that Jesus brings is radical love that reverses our worldly values system. Jesus's vision for the world is built on profound generosity, servant leadership, peacemaking, forgiveness, a rejection of religious hypocrisy, and a mandate to bring a breath-filled life to all.

But, it's not just a one-time deal. Much like the Spirit of God was poured out in Isaiah's time, it was poured out in Jesus's time, it was poured out on that first Pentecost, and so too, today, the Spirit moves like wind and fire to move us, push us urge us, and compel us to show God's radical love to those gasping for breath.

The Spirit is moving as we demand justice for George Floyd. The Spirit is moving as we question mass incarceration and the industrial food systems that have fueled the pandemic. The Spirit is moving as we wonder why “essential” workers aren’t always compensated fairly for their labors. The Spirit is moving as we question why economic inequality and racial inequities have led to more deaths among people of color. The Spirit of the Lord is upon *us* as we preach the good news of God’s loving vision for a world filled with radical generosity and peace. Good news that is for the poor, good news that is freedom for the imprisoned, good news that is sight to those who are unseeing, good news to those who cannot breathe, and good news aligned with what Jesus lived... and breathed.

So, today, as a dispersed church in the world, we are encouraged to act as the church. We are encouraged to preach *that* good news. So, at Wicker Park Lutheran Church we again say that Black Lives Matter. As Lutherans, we say that racism and white supremacy are sins.² We condemn all that seeks to divide as antithetical to Christ’s message. Today, we are resolved to move with the Spirit of justice. Today, we commit ourselves to deepen the work of our Antiracism Committee for Transformation (ACT for short). Today, we say that our God stands for life, for breath, and for justice.

² <https://elca.org/News-and-Events/8039>

That is the good news, siblings in Christ. That is Pentecost. The Spirit is moving, and she's moving quickly. The Spirit is among us, within us, and is spreading like wildfire. The Spirit is the backbone of this church, the Spirit is the backbone of our faith, and the Spirit is the confirmation that Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.