

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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This is the day of Pentecost – my very favorite day of the church year. But the story of Pentecost is bigger than just one day. This story has been unfolding for a very long time.

Many weeks ago, on the evening of Easter, Jesus appeared to the disciples – resurrected, in the flesh. And they were overjoyed. But their joy didn't last long, because then he told them that he wasn't staying forever.

Which brings us to what Jesus said in our gospel this morning, from John. Jesus said to the disciples,

“I didn't say these things to you from the beginning, because I was there with you. And, I know you're sad. But, it's a good thing I'm leaving, because I'm sending someone to you, who we call the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth. When she comes (and mind you, she is a she) when she comes, she will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement.”

She will prove the world wrong about sin because the world does not understand what sin is. You will hear many messages from this world – even preached from pulpits like this one, although god willing, not this one and not from my lips – that have the wrong idea about sin, that tell us

that sin is an individual affliction, that people are individually responsible for doing right and wrong, and that everyone has the ability to choose right all the time – and that's not true. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

So the Spirit will prove the world wrong about sin. She will teach us that sin is systemic, in other words sin is embedded in systems, systems that oppress, systems that push people down and leave them vulnerable to harm, systems like racism and sexism and transphobia. Systems that privilege stillness and order over dynamic movement and justice.

Jesus says the Spirit will prove the world wrong about righteousness. Now what could that mean? What does the world tell us about righteousness? What do churches and religious institutions teach us about righteousness?

They say anyone can be righteous if you do all the right things and show up when you're supposed to and give the right money and love the right people. In that sense then righteousness to the world is not about the heart or the soul or the work of God for justice. It is an appearance, a façade. It's only about looks.

The Spirit will prove the world wrong about righteousness. She teaches that God is found at the margins, at the tables of sinners, inside the heart of the one who doubts, the one who prays in tears, the one who wrestles with God.

The Spirit will prove the world wrong about judgement. What does the world teach about judgement? When you imagine God's judgement, what

are you seeing?

Our culture has imagined God's judgement through the image of eternal suffering in hellfire. People condemned to Dante's seven circles because of their individual choices, their individual actions, forever. The spirit will prove the world wrong about judgement – she teaches us that actually, living in this broken world is already suffering enough, and this is the suffering God will redeem us from. She teaches us that God's judgement is the same as God's redemption, and that the kingdom of God refers to God turning this world upside down and inside out, making all things new, making all things good, so that all of creation may be safe and loved.

I think it is no accident that the image of the Holy Spirit is fire – because fire creates and destroys. The Spirit of fire destroys what is broken so there is room for new things to grow from the ashes.

Humans are naturally afraid of destruction, we don't want the things that we built up to be taken away – even when those things don't serve us... or only serve some of us... things like white privilege and capitalism. It is scary to have things be destroyed.

But when God is the destroyer, we can trust that what is being destroyed is of no use to us if we want to live as God's people.

The Pentecost story in Acts is the story of the Holy Spirit coming in fire for the first time. By this moment Jesus had already gone back to the Father, and the disciples were alone... together. Well, they weren't that

alone, because everyone had gathered together in Jerusalem for a holy festival, called sha-VOO-oht, to commemorate when God gave Moses the Torah.

So there was big group gathered together in Jerusalem, probably twice as many as are in this room right now, and they were sad, and they were scared, but they knew that they were the people of God and that God loved them and that they had work to do... even without Jesus. They just didn't exactly know what to do next.

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the house where they were sitting.

Divided tongues of fire appeared among them and rested on each of them – and it didn't hurt – it was like the fire of the burning bush that Moses encountered on Mount Horeb. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now gathered that day in Jerusalem there were devout Jews of every people, every culture, every language under heaven. And when they heard the sound of the rushing wind they gathered around the house, and when they got close they could hear the voices and then they were truly amazed, because they could each hear their own language being spoken.

And they said, "Are Simon Peter and the others not Galileans? How is it that they are speaking our own native languages?" There were people

there from every place you could imagine, as far away as Parthia and Media, Egypt and Libya, Rome and Crete and Arabia, and in their own languages they were hearing the news of God's power and love.

Now this is a miracle meant to introduce us to the Advocate – the Spirit of Truth. But consider for a moment what has happened here.

It could have been – God is certainly capable – that this miracle was about everyone becoming the same. Was about some people being told they were wrong, all along, and others being vindicated. It could have been that everyone spoke in one language – Aramaic, or English. It could have been that this was the moment God's church was pushed into a tiny locked box, beautiful and golden and covered in jewels...

But that is the way of the Holy Spirit. And it is certainly not the way of the kingdom of God.

So instead the Holy Spirit came in wind and fire. Wind that blew open the doors, wind that called everyone in the city to come close, wind that brought people together and then sent them back out to all the corners of the world.

The Holy Spirit came to prove the world wrong about sin, and righteousness, and judgement. She came to show us what it can look like to be the people of God – not all the same, not all of us speaking the same language, praying the same words – but each of us, in our uniqueness, each of our cultures in their beauty, our sexualities, our

genders, our languages, the way we love – differently, perfectly, wonderfully – all our differences are a glory to God and to God’s people, all of our differences a delight in God’s sight, necessary in God’s church, the building blocks to the new world in the kingdom of God.

In our gospel today Jesus says, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. You have a lot to learn.

When the Spirit of Truth comes, she will guide you into all the truth. She will declare to you the things that are to come. She will glorify me, because she will take what is mine and declare them to you.”

In a few moments we will have a time of meditation. This is a time to wonder about how the Spirit is moving in this church, in this city, and in this world.

I wonder... what things does Jesus still have to say, that isn’t in the Bible, that will only come through encounters with the Spirit?

I wonder... what places are there in this city, in this world, that the people of many languages are gathering, drawn together by the Spirit of truth? And what is stopping us from going there too?