

Pentecost, Year A, 2020

Today is a very special day. Of course all Christians everywhere know that today is special because it is the day before the great Cooper's Hill Cheese rolling race in Gloucester, England on Whit Monday. Indeed it is a wonderful event that just like the story of Pentecost we see in Acts, people from all over the world gather. A Japanese man won the cheese roll race in 2013. Sadly however, this year it will be canceled due to Covid-19, so in honor of this great event, may we all feel the power of the Spirit by doing some cheese rolling at home!

But along with cheese, on this feast of Pentecost, at such a time in our nation's history, we might do well to ponder the fire of the Holy Spirit. Jesus offers this as a gift in our reading from John today. And even in Acts, Jesus has told them earlier to wait until they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. But this is not the only place in scripture we hear of this incredible gift. We also have the episode from the book of Numbers in our lectionary today, which recounts when the Holy Spirit gave the elders of Israel the power to prophesy. In other words, scripture is full of episodes and incidents, poems and songs which tell of God's power in action - the Holy Spirit.

Now, what happens when we have a fire inside and do nothing with it? Is it not like a dream deferred which might explode? Dream Deferred by Langston Hughes: *What happens to a dream deferred?/Does it dry up/Like a raisin in the sun?/Or fester like a sore--/And then run?/Does it stink like rotten meat?/Or crust and sugar over--/like a syrupy sweet?/Maybe it just sags/like a heavy load./Or does it explode?* Isn't that what an explosion is? Energy contained when it is too great to be contained? Instead of a great and destructive explosion is it not better to allow the fire of the Spirit to motivate and inspire us all regularly, so that each day each of us might use this fire constructively, to spread the love of God to others, to strive for justice and peace, to fight for the dignity of every human being? And what happens when we don't?

This week we can pose the question about lawlessness and rioting. We can pose the question and be critical of people who take it to the streets when they demand satisfaction. But we are not being righteous - right in the eyes of God, if we are not also questioning the circumstances that lead to people feeling as though their only recourse is taking it to the streets. I recall that it was recently the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riot in New York City, another time when people felt the need to take it to the streets. It happens. Do we criticize this aspect of human nature but ignore the other aspects of our nature which lead to circumstances where people feel backed up against a wall with no other way to express themselves or find peace in their own land, even in their own homes? Of course not. In our love for the human race we try to understand human nature and be empathetic. We search for creative and loving solutions. We do our best to fully understand.

This is from the Bishops' pastoral letter to the diocese this week: *Racism and the resulting violence against people of color perpetrated by those who have power in our nation and state has led recently to the tragic and inexcusable deaths of George Floyd in Minnesota, Jose Soto in Connecticut, Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, and Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia. Such violence is unacceptable and contrary to the will of God and the promise of justice and freedom central to our country's ideals. We must not let the realities of COVID-19 distract us from speaking out against, and working to dismantle, the forces of racism and white supremacy that continue to*

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*infect our lives and our nation. It is that very inaction and silence that feed into the legacy of white supremacy. Silence is complicity and we must not participate in the forces of evil that divide us. The injustice against people of color we have seen in recent weeks is not tolerable. It is contrary to the will of God and our Christian witness. We must speak up. We must work for change. And we must repent for the ways we are complicit in the ongoing violence in our society. We do this work together. We do this work for God. And we do this work so that all God's people may know safety, hope, and love.*

Let me tell you about my good friend Mark. I was in college and needed a bass player in the band so one day when I overheard two people talking about their favorite guitar players and I decided to take a shot, say hello, and ask if anyone knew a bass player. Turns out Mark is a fantastic bass player and we have played a lot of music together over the years and we are still good friends. Mark moved out to Long Island a few years ago with his wife. He teaches English and Joy teaches ESL in a big New York City public high school where I did my student teaching. So they left the city to live in suburbs and make a happy home. But the other day I got a very unusual text from him. Texts from Mark are always just goofy nonsense about life. Never serious. But this was about walking down the block to escape the quarantine for a bit and having someone shout horribly racist remarks to him. I'm leaving it there because the comments were intertwined with political preferences, and it's Sunday, and this is enough. Being black, Mark has suffered with this his whole life. He can't just walk down the block in peace. He once made me stop running down the block. I asked why and he said it's dangerous for a black man to run down the block. I have many more stories that are both personal and from friends but we have to go home some time today, and I am only a white man.

The point is that we have work to do. Much work. This work is difficult. It requires political action, donating to organizations, making relationships, not tolerating intolerance, and being a true ally with all of God's children. But I know we can do this work and it will bring us joy because today is the feast of Pentecost. Today we acknowledge our chosen-ness as the Body of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Today we remember that each of us has a fire inside and together we make a great conflagration. Not one to destroy forests or buildings. This is the fire of God. The flame which consumes the dross to leave the gold. A fire that keeps people warm and lights the way. This is the fire that animates the dry bones in the valley, creates humankind from the dust of the earth and gives courage to a group of followers hiding in an upper room. This is the fire of the Holy Spirit that makes us who we are. Today is the feast of Pentecost where we celebrate the birth of the church. Today we let this little light shine.