

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

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Pentecost, Year A

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In 2017 I spent ten weeks at Sibley Memorial Hospital in Washington, DC, completing chaplaincy training for ordained ministry. Hospital chaplaincy is hard work. It's hard being present with people in their hardest, and sometimes their last, moments. I felt inadequate to the challenge. One of my colleagues, a Catholic theology student, shared that he paused before each closed door and prayed: Come, Holy Spirit, Come. As a chaplain he was just there to be present. God would do the work through him. Come, Holy Spirit, Come.

That memory popped up yesterday as I continued to struggle with what to say on Pentecost Sunday after a week of mourning the death of George Floyd, a week of shock and anger and helplessness in the face of the horrible sin of racism. Come, Holy Spirit, Come. Pentecost is all about the Holy Spirit, all about the mighty power of God showing up and inviting-compelling-demanding the people of God to be the Body of Christ and to live in such a way that this world looks more like God's kingdom, in which no one is oppressed, everyone has enough, and love of God and neighbor prevail. I feel inadequate to face the sin of racism, and so I take hope in the truth that we are not called to do it alone. Come, Holy Spirit, Come.

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. It's the connection between God and everything, the energy of life in which we are called to participate, the vehicle to help

bring about the Kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit connects us to God and one another and helps us live as we should.

In today's reading from Acts, the disciples are together in a house after Jesus' Ascension. They are following the guidance of those two angels who scolded them for staring at the cloud where Jesus used to be and told them to go to Jerusalem and wait. The disciples are together in one place, separated from the world in a house, and here comes the Holy Spirit like a mighty wind. I can't help but imagine the roar of the wind, the shock of such a divine in-breaking. The Spirit descends into their locked room, and it *sends them out*. There is no talk of obeying, or following, no time to ask questions or argue. No, they are *overwhelmed*. The Spirit descended like tongues of fire and *they could not be still. They could not be silent*. Come, Holy Spirit, Come.

The Spirit descends and the disciples *act*. They *go*. They leave the safety of that upper room and enter the busy streets of Jerusalem and they *speak*. The Holy Spirit empowers them, emboldens them, and *that* is the moment the Church is born. Not with ritual, not with a building, not even at the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. No, the Church begins when the Spirit rushes in and sends the followers of Jesus out. That is *still* the work of the Church.

Locked rooms have never stopped God. When Peter and Paul were imprisoned, an earthquake freed them. Jesus called Lazarus out of that tomb. And what about the people Jesus healed, who were imprisoned by disease and stigma? God incarnate met them *right there* and opened doors that seemed shut tight. When the people of God are

boxed in, closed in locked rooms, God shows up. No, locked rooms have never stopped God. And they shouldn't stop God's people either.

I feel like I'm living in locked rooms these days. My world is smaller than it used to be, geographically and socially. We're closed off from others, either in our homes or behind masks or at a safe social distance, and right now *that's the right call*. I'm much more concerned with the metaphorical locked room of racism. The Holy Spirit invites us to unity, but again and again, unconsciously or consciously, we lock ourselves away and separate ourselves from one another. Racism is persistent, and it flourishes even more when well-meaning white folks like me assume that it is either a thing of the past or an anomaly. Many of us would prefer to hide our faces to the everyday symptoms of racism, things like housing inequality and food deserts, discrepancies in health care and health outcomes exacerbated by the stress of just being black or brown in America.

This past week, racism reared its ugly head in a way we cannot ignore. Our nation has once again seen the sin of racism take another innocent life. Once again an unarmed black man has died at the hands of officers sworn to protect him. It hurts. It's an outrage. We have been locked up in the sin of racism for a very long time. And if we feel shock and surprise, know this: the shock and surprise that many of us feel is a luxury that people of color do not have. What happened this week is not new. George Floyd's death is not new. Neither was Breonna Taylor's death in March, or Ahmaud Arbery's death in February, or Trayvon Martin's in 2012, or Emmett Till's in 1955. My friends live with the fear that their black sons will somehow be perceived as a threat by a white person and not survive the interaction. Come, Holy Spirit, Come.

For those of us who don't live in the daily fear of systemic racism, we tend to get paralyzed by the enormity of it all. We watch the news, we are shocked, we are saddened, and then we wait, and the urgency wanes, and we forget until we are shocked anew at the next bit of racism to reach the headlines. It's time to stop that cycle. It's past time to stop turning away, to stop waiting for the system to correct itself. Come, Holy Spirit, Come. It's time to speak up when we hear racist language at the dinner table or the water cooler. It's time to look at our social circles and see just how diverse they are. It's time to listen to the voices of people of color when they say that the system doesn't work. It's time to read articles about racism *written by its victims*. It's time for us to uplift those voices, to hand over whatever megaphones we might possess to the black and brown people whose children and parents and siblings and spouses are dying. Come, Holy Spirit, Come.

God calls us to unity, not division. God calls us to reconciliation, and reconciliation begins with repentance, with a change of heart. God calls us out of separation, out of tribalism and racism and prejudice, into the Body of Christ, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. I cannot be certain about the right way to respond to the racism and inhumanity I see, but I know that if I keep alert the Spirit will invite me to act, and will give me the strength to do so. Come, Holy Spirit, Come.

On Pentecost the Holy Spirit rained down on a group of Jesus followers who still had work to do. And we *still* have work to do. At baptism each of us receives the Holy Spirit. At our best, our lives are broken open by the Spirit and we find it *impossible* to remain in those locked-up rooms. At our best we are filled with the Holy Spirit, that

terrifying and awesome wind, those tongues of fire, and it pushes us beyond our comfort zone and out into the world. At our best, we are sent out, perhaps a little afraid, definitely feeling ill-equipped, and we work for the Kingdom. We do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with God. We call out iniquity when we see it. We step out in faith. We allow ourselves to be propelled by the Spirit. Come, Holy Spirit, Come.