

Let the Spirit In  
Acts 2.1-21  
June 9, 2019  
Pentecost 1C  
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott  
St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

Friends, we living in-between what was and what will be in the muddy is-ness of now, and we don't really love in-between-ness. We humans rarely love transition time when we are no longer fully where we were but also not yet where we are going. The feeling of saying goodbye to co-workers and friends and neighbors before a cross-country move but still being in your *here* home, only not-quite-home because it's filling with boxes. Still eating at your *here* favorite restaurants, only aware of last times and what will be lost. Making trips to *there* home and imagining a life somewhere new but also *not there* just yet and not really certain of what *there* will be like because it's not *here*.

A child leaving for college in August, but right now it's June. So family is as-it-should-be is still *now*, but orientation is soon. And dorm room supplies are being purchased. And more campus visits are being made. The nest isn't empty just yet. You and your spouse are looking at each other with fear and curiosity, excitement and sadness. *All of us* becomes *just us* in all its meanings. But not quite yet.

Pick your in-between and not-quite-yet stories and feel the tension of the moment before the old is gone and the new has come. Some of the stories are part of the ordinary path of life and some are crisis moments when you have cried out to God to either go back to where you were or get to the other side of where you are going but PLEASE be done with the painful middle! Maybe in-between holds promise and energy and excitement just as it can hold fear and dread and grief. Welcome to Pentecost in 2019, my loves. We are living in between times.

We're not altogether wrong to celebrate this day as the birthday of the church...but we're not entirely right, either, because celebrating it as an anniversary or a fixed point in time diminishes the reality of ongoing revelation and ongoing birth. The stories we tell and the boldness we celebrate all have to do with the in-between place of an emerging movement. Jesus has passed on, risen up, been taken away by the cloud, and the Jesus Way is being born as a movement we will come to know as Christianity. New Testament Professor Margaret Aymer observes, "[The Pentecost story] describes not the birth of the church, but rather the empowerment of the believers to bear

witness to the ends of the earth, as promised in Acts 1:8<sup>1</sup> when Jesus said to his followers, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” These Pentecost stories are not marking the creation of an institution to enshrine and maintain, but a wild movement to intuit and follow with body, heart, and soul.

What we celebrate today is not buildings that were erected or bylaws and committees that were set in place. What we celebrate today is the fiery Spirit of God that takes who we are and begins swirling around and within us, tugging at the gifts and talents and passions we carry, pulling them to the surface, and sending us out as little fires to make good trouble and real change in our world in the way and name of Jesus. With the Spirit’s help, we were empowered on that day, and again in our lifetimes, to push against culture and stand against empire even if it killed us. But something shifted along the way, and in at least half of the world, church stopped pushing against culture and became culture; church stopped standing against empire and became empire.

We are undoing that right now in the work of our lifetimes. I say “we” and am not including ALL of my siblings in faith who identify as followers of the Christ. I say “we” and mean folks like us here at St. Charles—folks who are part of the institution and have also been burned by the institution. We are, as Father Rohr puts it, at the edge of the inside. We are reformers and not power brokers. We are a remnant and not the ones holding phony liturgical holidays to pray for and prop up our wholly inappropriate and cozy relationship with a head of state. We want to see the end of that way. We want to listen for the wind of the Spirit. We want to follow the fire of the dove. We want to be led by love and not self-preservation. We want to be guided by Spirit and not ego. We want to take hold of what is good and let the rest fall to the wayside. We want to welcome others onto the Way that gives us life and not death, that makes us more fully ourselves and not less, that expands our awareness of God and self and others, that makes out of this old world a new one.

That’s a lot to hope for in the hot, sticky, summery season of Pentecost. But we are waiting to let the Spirit in and hope her fire is emboldening and truth-telling. We pray for Spirit to shine light where there is darkness and enable us to see both what is and what could be. We recognize we, for a time, have had more attachment and affection for the institutions where we experience church than we do for the swirling Spirit that calls us to be part of the great movement of God. But that is changing for us here. Maybe it already has changed. We don’t want to simply go through the motions and prop up the old thing. We don’t want to be passive audience to the church show and

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3282](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3282)

watch as a small group within the institution acts out the essence of church. This was often joked of as the 80/20 rule—20% of the church does 80% of the work and 20% of the church gives 80% of the money needed to fund the work of the church. And for a long time, you could be in the 80% of those who took great comfort in being a sometimes church attender who didn't do much, didn't give much, didn't change much about his/her life in light of the teachings of Christ and yet still identify as Christian.

We are at the end of that reality, thanks be to God. Something is coming. Something is here. A new fire is starting to burn that is calling us into another story, and the in-between-ness of this moment is both exhilarating and terrifying. Are we ready to let the Spirit in and follow the Spirit into whatever is on its way? Stick with me. I think we're at the edge of welcoming the new. We're seeing glimpses already in the pilot lunches we hosted around criminal justice reform. We're seeing the shape of what will be the St. Charles Center for Faith + Action. We're sensing our evolving and emerging presence as a force for change and love in this city. Stick with me in the in-between time and the transition ahead. Hold onto the Spirit stories and to the hope and promise of what is emerging as we step even more fully into who we are and what is coming next for us here and in our walking-around-daily-lives. We can't be part of birthing something new here and not be changed by it ourselves, right? We can't be part of embodying a more expansive and loving way, a more radical and revolutionary faith, without being disrupted and made new by that love in our most private selves.

Our sacred story this morning tells of the language of people being heard in ways that enable them to connect and be known by one another. The skills and joys and unique personalities of individuals flourished there in that place not just for the good of a faith community but for the greater good of the world. These are simultaneously origin stories and rebirth stories. John Philip Newell speaks of rebirthing as "what is deepest in us coming forth again" and "what is at the heart of all things—made of God—being set free to emerge in radically new ways." In *The Rebirthing of God* Newell "is pointing to a radical reemergence of the Divine from deep within us. We do not have to create it. We cannot create it. But we can let it spring forth and be reborn in our lives. We can be part of midwifing new holy births in the world."<sup>2</sup>

What is being born in your life? What is being born deep within you? What is being born here in this community of faith?

We are standing in the fullness of who are are as people following on the way of Christ. We are holding a generous space here for all kinds of people who want to truly, deeply

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<sup>2</sup> John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, pp. ix-x

see the world as God intended it to be, to love the world in Jesus' name, and to reform the world where it needs to be reformed by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

About a dozen of us walked and rode and jogged and danced along the route of last night's Pride Parade. Along the way, we passed out postcards with information about the church—some of them handed out directly, some wrapped in rainbow beads—and I sat on the edge of the truck bed and watched person after person look at that card and look back at us with a blend of shock and curiosity. Sure, there were folks who were clearly done with organized religion and wholly suspicious of friendly Baptists plopped down in the middle of Pride. As they should be. I get it. We bear a name that has hurt a lot of people, and we know that. But we're reformers and Spirit chasers, and we haven't managed to let it go just yet because it sure does seem that God is making something new out of something old here. Then I saw so many faces, many many more faces, who read the words out loud: Ask Questions. Seek Justice. Love Neighbors. Welcome All. Who are these people? What kind of place is this? Well, you see, we're reformers and Spirit chasers. And we haven't managed to let to of this Jesus Way just yet, either. In fact, we're following it off road, away from the path that others carved out for us. We're discovering it extends and winds around in ways we've never seen before.

Newell reminds us and almost warns us that "to ask what is trying to be born...requires a radical reorientation of our vision. What is the new thing that is trying to emerge from deep within us and from deep within the collective soul of Christianity?" What will emerge when we fully let the Spirit in? Where will the path wind and turn next? What new thing will be born in our private lives and spill out into our shared life together? We're in-between. It's happening, but we aren't fully there yet. We're becoming more fully ourselves but still have some of the old ways hanging on. We're heading somewhere that we can sense and see but where we don't yet live. We're in Pentecost times, and what is of Spirit will come rushing through these aisles and these city streets and our very souls each and every time we make ourselves ready for it. And this Pentecost truth is what we celebrate today. Amen.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Selections (particularly John Philip Newell) pulled from June 4, 2017, sermon, "Spirit Fire" by Rev. Lott