

Our Pentecost Moment

A reflection on recent gun violence.

Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21 Genesis 11:1-9
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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June 5, 2022

Today is the Day of Pentecost. It's a time for celebration. Pentecost, which literally means fiftieth, marks the 50th day since Easter. The gospel writer, Luke, who also wrote the Book of Acts, from which this story is told, marks the gift of the Holy Spirit coming into the lives of Jesus' followers, transforming them from a state of fear to empowering them to become the church, spreading the good news of the ways and teachings of Jesus, and helping usher in the kin-dom of God. Pentecost, therefore, is often referred to as the birth of the Christian Church.

I had planned to preach about how unity was created out of the diversity of those followers from all the known nations of the world (at least in Luke's understanding) who heard Peter's message in their own native language. I had planned on preaching about how this story basically reverses the effects of the Old Testament story from Genesis 11 of the Tower of Babel, when God confused their language so that they would not understand one another's speech, scattering them abroad over the face of all the earth (Genesis 11:7-8). I had planned on preaching how the Holy Spirit makes us aware of our own common humanity, allowing us to embrace God's rich diversity among one another, resulting in the building of a strong sense of community. I had planned to reflect upon the words of Isaac S Villegas, a Mennonite pastor in North Carolina, who writes in an article entitled, "Unconverted Difference":

Pentecost invites us into a new way of engaging with difference—not just with different languages, but with all the ways we are marked as different from one another. **At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit speaks through the differences, without converting them into sameness.** People aren't invited to give up their languages, their cultures, and convert to the same way of speaking and thinking... **Through the Spirit, difference is made holy.**

This is what I planned on celebrating with you on this particular Pentecost Sunday. However, I am not in a celebratory mood. I suspect many of you aren't either. Neither is our country. With the rash of devastating mass gun violence around our country just within the past two weeks, I, and again I suspect many of you, am filled with deep sadness and grief, much anger, and even fear.

On Friday evening, in response to the killing of four in the Natalie Building at the St. Francis medical complex here in Tulsa, preceded by the mass killing at Robb Elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, and the supermarket killing in Buffalo, New York, I attended a vigil held in the Greenwood District at the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park. I was joined by other Presbyterian leaders, including the Rev. Gordon Edwards, the

Rev. Debbie Chase, the Rev. Tim Blodgett, the General Presbyter of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, Valerie Young, the Synod Leader and Stated Clerk of the Synod of the Sun, Jim Kirk, the national director of our Presbyterian Disaster Assistance program, and others.

This Friday evening vigil followed a day-long Tri-Presbytery Meeting of all three presbyteries in Oklahoma, held at First Presbyterian Church downtown, which concluded yesterday around noon. The vigil itself was organized by the John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation. To my surprise, the organizing speaker asked for any pastors in the crowd to join them up in the front. While I said we should all go up front, the others said no – but that I should. So, I did.

Having attended many such vigils in the past, including one just the week before at Morning Star Baptist Church, I saw my role as simply standing in solidarity as the other leaders passionately spoke. But then I was handed the microphone. With a bit of fear and trembling, I started by saying that I was attending the vigil simply to be part of the grieving community, having no intention of being part of a pastor line. But I took the opportunity to say that I was a patient of Dr. Preston Phillips, the primary target in the killing, and had just scheduled an appointment with him earlier this very week. So this all hit very close to home. I have since learned of others in our congregation who were also his patients.

I then shared a passage of scripture from John 14 with the gathered crowd, which I preached on just two weeks ago. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27). This is a wonderful passage of hope and encouragement. But then I openly confessed, **my heart is troubled and I am afraid**. Yet again, I suspect many of you are feeling the same. Yet, I closed by stating that **God is not the author of tragedy but rather is with us in the midst of tragedy. Adding, there is always hope knowing God is among us and within us**. Yes, the same Spirit of God that was in Jesus dwells within us, as well. This was the gift at Pentecost.

The question now, for you and I as individuals and as a community of faith, is **what do we do with our sadness and grief, our anger, and our fear?** A few days ago, I replaced the profile photo of myself on my personal Facebook page with an image of an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle with a red circle crossed out mark. It was a statement of my personal stance toward gun violence prevention. **To our counterparts in the faith who are pro-life, some claiming we can't be Christians if we are pro-choice, I ask: How can you be both pro-life and pro-gun? How can a person be pro-life and not support getting rid of assault rifles? Is it not hypocritical to pick and choose where they want to be pro-life, pushing to abolish abortion while at the same time grant unfettered access to guns, those designed specifically to be weapons of war? These are theological and moral questions for which we must all wrestle**. At this point, it looks like we're at an impasse, that we can't find unity in our diversity over these issues. Perhaps the Holy Spirit can accomplish that.

I'm proud to mention our **own Presbyterian denomination is a very strong advocate for gun violence prevention**. Several years ago, the General Assembly of the PCUSA released a lengthy curriculum on this topic which we diligently studied at the time in our Adult Church School Class. Just yesterday our denomination posted on Facebook the following prayer.

Dear God. We pray for a world free from the gun violence that takes, that destroys, that divides. We pray for real change, honest conversation, and true healing among your people. May we work together, with your guidance, to march down the path of peace. Amen.

Just a couple of weeks ago, when the pastors in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery gathered on our weekly zoom video call, we were asked **what we are doing as pastors, and within the congregation we serve, to address the near-constant trauma we are facing in this nation.** This particular Tuesday followed the killing in Buffalo, and just before we heard the news later that day about the mass killing in Uvalde. Sadly, some of the responses were that **there was little to no direct engagement with these issues in their congregation. One lamented that it's hard because how can we be prophetic without being political.** I responded, hopefully in a kind way, that **being prophetic, speaking truth to power, especially as revealed in the Old Testament, is always, by its very nature, political.** The key, however, is to not be blatantly partisan. That, in and of itself, is a tall order in these times of divisive polarization over every cultural issue. I went as far as asking, in sincerity, what would Jesus do? **I, and our Presbyterian denomination, believe Jesus would indeed advocate for change when it comes to preventing gun violence.** So, as your pastor, that is what I intend to do, as I have for several years now.

The follow-up question, however, is **what is College Hill, as a community of faith, willing to do, or not do, to advocate for gun safety?** After the vigil at Reconciliation Park, those who I previously mentioned, and others, shared a meal and discussion together at a nearby restaurant. Both Valerie Young, the Synod of the Sun leader, and Jim Kirk, the national leader of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA), told me directly that they both have funds available if College Hill could put together some kind of plan and program to work for gun violence prevention here in Tulsa. That planted a seed with me, and one I now hope to plant with you and especially the Ruling Elders on our Session, to explore what, if anything, we might do to step out in courage and take meaningful action. We all acknowledged that **being prophetic is risky. Are we willing to take that risk?**

Since our hearts and minds are currently filled with catastrophic images from the events of the past few weeks, and from before, I'd like to leave us with is a hopeful image. Yesterday morning at the Tri-Presbytery meeting, Jim Kirk (from PDA) shared with me the image of a **labyrinth.** A labyrinth is a path, not a maze, that circles back and forth around a common center. Sometimes the path gets really close to the center, only to veer off and head back to the far edge of the circle. But eventually, the path leads into the heart of the circle.

Working for gun violence prevention, and justice of any kind, is a lot like walking a labyrinth, we make progress only to head back outwards again – the back and forth. Perseverance, therefore, is needed to continue walking on the path, hopefully someday reaching the center itself. In this case, to peace, safety, and justice. When I brought up to Jim the common phrase of the arc of the universe bending toward justice, he commented that our advocacy is often needed to help push and prod that arc along its path to bend ever-closer toward justice.

College Hill has always valued putting our faith into action. We take seriously our share of pushing and prodding, like painting Black Lives Matter in huge letters on our parking lot. **We are indeed called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to actively engage the world, bearing witness to God's peace, love, and justice in the world.**

Perhaps the recent horrific events will create another spark that energizes and empowers us to a deeper level of working for the change that is so desperately needed in our society. **Perhaps this is our Pentecost moment, being filled with the Spirit of God birthing a community that is safe for all.**

Amen.

Resources:

Isaac S. Villegas, Unconverted Difference (Acts 2:1-21), christiancentury.org