

## **PENTECOST - Romans 8:18-39 - Acts 2:1-4**

### **The Story of God's Love**

Paul brings the first eight chapters of his letter to the Romans to a resounding conclusion. From here, Paul will go on to that which weighs so heavily on his heart - the rejection of Christ by his own people, the Jews.

Paul's message is uncompromising: "nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God." He lists at least twenty demons that threaten to undo us: suffering, weakness, frustration, bondage to decay, ignorance, trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword, death, life, angels, demons, powers, the present, the future, heights, depths, and as if that were not enough, "anything else in all creation." None of these can separate you from God's love.

You can personalize your own list: parents, children, your boss, employees, colleagues, foolish choices, bedeviling sins, public failure, private disappointments, anxieties, school, a bad business deal, and on it goes. Paul remains adamant in his conviction: nothing can separate you from God's love.

If you consider Paul's own Christian journey you realize that his explicit language is not pious cliché, not mere metaphor, but a deeply held conviction born of his personal experiences. Following his conversion, God foretold Paul that he would suffer much for God's kingdom, and that

“prison hardship” awaited him in every city. And so it did. Brutal treatment, constant harassment, and strong opposition were his regular fare.

Paul considered that he and the first apostles were viewed as sheep to a slaughter; people in last place; public spectacles; dishonoured fools; vagrants who were hungry and thirsty, homeless and in rags; and in those memorable words from 1 Corinthians, “the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.” Through all of this and more, Paul remained insistent: nothing in all creation can separate you from God’s love.

According to some denominations or misled individuals, suffering is seen as a sign that God is not with that person. If blessings are not seen in someone’s life, then God is not there. This is known as the *Prosperity Gospel*. If you recall the reading two weeks ago, Paul proclaimed that suffering produces hope. This does not mean that we actively seek suffering, but the hope we have helps us to accept and deal with whatever comes our way.

Christian life entails suffering, not primarily because we must overcome our sin, but because the world is full of persecution awaiting the faithful. Suffering is never God’s will. Paul reassures the Roman church: that living out their calling as disciples of Jesus brings with it the assurance that God is at work for good in all that happens, that in the process they are being conformed to the image of Jesus and that they will be glorified,

rewarded by the gift of eternal life. They will experience a foretaste of that life to come, in the joy of today.

All that happens, whatever happens, God can work with, for the good of those who love God. Suffering is real and God is with us through all of our suffering. God's grace doesn't have a boundary that stops at the worst part of our lives. It extends over it. Paul explains how faithfulness in Christ delivers us from the mire of human life.

In the ancient world, warfare, death, famine, destruction, were more tangible for the people. They were part of real life. This makes Paul's statement that much more radical. Nothing is able to separate those experiencing adversities from the love of God, even those living in the shadow of the Roman Empire in the city of Rome. Not the powers, rulers, swords, perils, or grave reality of life - not even these can separate the people from the love of God – the only one, dominant power in the world.

When you feel alienated, separated and estranged, perhaps by others or even by or from your own self, when you sense that everyone and everything is against you, it is easy to forget Paul's declaration that God is unequivocally for you. Mystics referred to those times as the "long night of the soul." These were times of suffering or alienation, or loneliness, when we may not have the words to speak or pray. It's beautiful comfort to know the Spirit itself prays for us and with us and

within us when we don't have the words or know how to express ourselves to God. Paul puts it eloquently - the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. God can speak in us, through us, and for us when we don't have the words to speak.

In Acts, we are presented with a portrait of what this looks like. What does it look like when God shows up in this mighty, unexpected way? What does it look like to see a community embraced by God's Spirit in a way that embodies and enlivens this call - a community that knows that nothing separates us from the love of God? In Acts, Jesus' promise that a great gift is coming is finally fulfilled. The gift arrives in grand style on Pentecost. Pentecost was not a new feast or celebration created by early followers of Jesus. The Jews celebrated Pentecost, which commemorated the giving of the ten commandments to Moses, fifty days after Passover. So, it was natural to gather in Jerusalem for this important feast in Judaism.

So, along with the throng of Pentecost observers, we find this early, small, community of one hundred and twenty disciples and followers of Jesus, gathered together, waiting as Jesus instructed them, waiting for the promised gift. The Spirit is not confined to a particular group of people but to all nations as Jesus foretold. The physical presence of the Spirit is enacted through the sounds of a high wind. In both the Old and New Testaments, the bible uses the word "wind" interchangeably with "Holy Spirit." Spirit is wind; wind is Spirit. Along with the wind, there are

“divided tongues, as of fire” – fire is used as a metaphor for enthusiasm and spirit. But, the major point of confusion and amazement in the crowd is summed up in – “everyone heard the apostles speaking in the native language of each.”

Divided tongues of fire descend upon each of them. The Holy Spirit descends upon them and it appears that they begin to speak in other languages, an ability given to them by the Spirit. Some interpreters suggest that it wasn't the ability to speak in different languages that was bestowed upon the disciples, but it was the hearers who were given the ability to understand the message that was being proclaimed in the language of the disciples.

One thing that is important to remember here is that Pentecost is NOT a reversal of Babel. A common misunderstanding is that Pentecost fixes or reverses the events at Babel. This is a complete misunderstanding of the event. This would suggest that what God did at Babel was to punish the Babel residents by afflicting them with different cultures and languages. We know that is not true. We know that Luke, the author of Acts, does not read or understand the gift of the Spirit as a reversal of Babel.

Instead, everyone **hears** the message in their own language. What an amazing way to demonstrate God's love! Pentecost is the “wholehearted expression of the almost unlimited imagination of God.” We are part of

what God is doing – opening our eyes and hearts to understand people who are different from us. When we are open to the movement of God’s Spirit, God will move through us, bringing unity to the church and to the world. The Holy Spirit will move to renew us and use us. We are all sparks of the Divine flame. **We are not just human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.**

A few years ago, USA Today ran a story about the Connie T. Maxwell Home started by Baptists in Greenwood, South Carolina. The home started as an orphanage and as times changed it adapted to serving children in any sort of need. In the interview, the director, a cheerful harried woman, told heart-breaking stories of the children’s lives before they were brought to the home.

She was asked how she, and other staff, cope with the constant stress and the pain of the children. The director smiled and said that one had to keep a sense of humour and perspective. She showed the reporter a file in her desk where she kept a collection of cute, poignant or funny things the children had said. She said, “Whenever I get over-whelmed, I just open this drawer and read a few of these and I feel better.”

The paper printed several of the things the kids said. One of the favourites came from a nine-year-old boy: *Germs, germs, germs! Jesus, Jesus, Jesus! That’s all I ever hear about around here and I ain’t never*

*seen either one of them.* That young boy sums up the “Jesus problem” in John’s Gospel.

It’s Maundy Thursday and Jesus is in the midst of trying to explain everything to his disciples before he leaves. They just don’t seem to be getting it. Jesus realized that when he is gone, they’ll be like that little boy; hearing and talking about Jesus without ever seeing him. So Jesus promises an answer, a solution to this “Never seeing Jesus problem” – the Holy Spirit. Jesus talks about a Counsellor, comforter, paraclete – and the “spirit of truth,” but it’s the Holy Spirit he’s talking about.

The disciples probably heard Jesus, looked at each other quizzically, and nodded as if they actually understood; but they really didn’t and after he stopped talking, they promptly forgot what he said. We’re all familiar with this; it’s what we all do when our husband or wife, boss or teacher, parent, son or daughter tells us things we don’t understand and don’t care about enough to ask for clarification.

So, the disciples forgot about it. Then came the crucifixion, the resurrection, the hiding out, followed by the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus with his popping in and out of their lives for a few weeks, and finally the ascension, with Jesus’ “floating off into heaven”. And in the midst of all that, who could remember a little un-comprehended promise about a counsellor? A paraclete? A Comforter? The Spirit of truth?

So, here they were minding their own insignificant little messianic Christian storefront cult business, singing hymns, praying and waiting, yet still hiding out from the authorities, when *whoosh*, Jesus' promise comes gloriously true. Noise, wind, fire, voices shouting, movement, out of control, religious excitement; of one thing we can be absolutely certain: the first church was definitely NOT Lutheran! The church was born in answer to the problem of talking about Jesus without being able to see him. *Germ, germ, germ. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. That's all I hear about around here and I ain't never seen either one of them.*

What that young boy was talking about is understandable – but he was so wrong! He did see Jesus every day in the very existence of the home, built and supported by the church. He saw Jesus every day in the people who bathed, fed, disciplined, taught and loved him. The church is the place – and the people – where and among whom Jesus is not just talked about but is shown to the world. It is not by accident that the New Testament constantly refers to the church as the body of Christ.

So, how do we speak about the Holy Spirit's work today? What might this look like? The event in Acts isn't just something to be imitated. If we don't see this happen, it doesn't mean that Pentecost is not alive for us today. There are moments when we encounter people who are different from us, people we have previously been set apart from, for various reasons. At that special moment, that unexpected encounter, we hear ourselves addressed warmly face-to-face. This is not about language,



but it is this act of loving one another, that makes us feel addressed and knitted together with people from whom we were previously set apart because of language, culture, religion, sexual orientation, class, or race. Is that not a Pentecost moment? We don't need the wind or Divine flames or people suddenly speaking other languages, in order to see this kind of knitting together, this kind of imagination where we can understand one another and where God speaks to us most clearly, most directly in the way that we need to hear God the most.

Imagine the Kingdom of God as described in Revelation - people of every nation, every time, worshipping God together. In Romans, Paul envisions the whole creation joining in praise, not just humans, or all the nations, but all creation ending up praising God with full voice - praising God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The work of the Father, Son, and Spirit are put on display in a kaleidoscopic vision of the coming turn of the ages. Jesus holds in himself the eschatological destiny of humanity and the cosmos as a whole, a purpose envisioned and enacted by God, and one that began through the Spirit who not only raised Jesus but will also raise us up through her power. This is the story of God's love. It is the story into which we are written as daughters and sons of a God whose love will never be separated from us.

Come, Holy Spirit. Come as mighty wind or gentle breath. Blow on the embers of our faith. Empower us to speak and to act so that there might come a day when there is not a needy person among us.

**Amen.**

## PRAYERS FOR PENTECOST MAY 28, 2023

PRAYERS of the People (Come Holy Spirit ..... Pray for us)

Empowering God, you gave the church the abiding presence of your Holy Spirit. Look upon your church today and hear our petitions as we say: Come Holy Spirit ..... **Pray for us.**

Your Spirit gathers the church. With your grace, enliven bishops, pastors, deacons, teachers, and artists and lay leaders, that they proclaim the gospel of peace in their own languages.  
Come Holy Spirit ..... **Pray for us.**

God who calls us, you have claimed each of us by name. We are your cherished children, called to share your care and compassion in this world. Your Spirit animates the creation. By your power renew the earth. Fill us with wonder for your handiwork, that we willingly be partners with you in preserving and restoring the land, skies, streams, lakes, and seas.  
Come Holy Spirit ..... **Pray for us.**

God who strengthens us, you build us up through your Word of promise, through your family meal, through our time together. Empower and equip us to seek out opportunities for service. Fill us with your life.  
Come Holy Spirit ..... **Pray for us.**

God who leads us, you direct us into your future, where relationships are restored, pain is alleviated, hunger is eradicated, and poverty is unknown. In spite of the obstacles we create, guide us into living this future today.  
Come Holy Spirit ..... **Pray for us.**

Your Spirit revives body and soul. In your mercy, soothe the afflicted, uplift the sorrowful, comfort the grieving, and heal the sick.....  
Come Holy Spirit ..... **Pray for us.**

Let us lift in prayer those persecuted for following the religious consciences of their Pentecost forebears. Remind those living in the midst of injustices and persecution that you walk with them, especially: the faithful persecuted in Nicaragua where the Catholic Church is treated as a political enemy with the arrests of priests, and expelling of missionaries; for the faithful persecuted in Nigeria where Fulani militants attack Christian villages with impunity, killing more than 6,000 Christians and destroying 17 villages; for the faithful persecuted in China where authorities have detained or forcibly disappeared Catholic priests and bishops; for the faithful persecuted in India where there is a rising tide of violence against Christians; for the Christian faithful in Iran where they suffer indignities and where church services are raided and worshippers arrested; for the faithful persecuted in Afghanistan where religious minorities face strident official discrimination and societal abuses.

Come Holy Spirit ..... **Pray for us.**

Your Spirit energizes this faith community. Spur on young and old alike to use their creative talents, energies, and resources for building up the body of Christ. Grant that, gathered and directed by your Spirit, we may confess Christ as Lord and combine our diverse gifts with a singular passion to continue his mission in this world he loves so much.

Come Holy Spirit ..... **Pray for us.**

God who sends us, your world cries out. Help us to respond. Your people suffer. Show us what we can do. Your creation groans. We have much work to do. Fill us with your life.

Come Holy Spirit ..... **Pray for us.**

Do not only answer **our** prayers, loving God. Use us to **answer** the prayers of the **world**, in the name of Jesus.

**Amen**

God in Community, Holy in One, make us one Body from many individuals, as we pray as Jesus teaches us, saying, "Our Father, ..."