

Where and How Do We Go from Here, Part II

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

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Verses from I Corinthians 12:4-26; Acts 2:1-17

Call to Worship: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Day of Pentecost.

The first church began with the question, “Where and how do we go from here?” Jesus was gone, and his followers were waiting together for the Spirit that he said would give them the answer.

The Spirit came like a blast of wind, like fire, like rocket fuel. It answered the question “where and how do we go from here?” by propelling them to think and live in completely new ways.

The Spirit gave them a vision of what the creator of the earth intended humanity to be—compassionate and generous, loving and just. The Spirit empowered them to model this and change the world around them.

They spent much time together. They boldly risked sharing in public the sacred way that Jesus taught. They pooled everything they owned, making sure everyone had what they needed. They gave what was left over to the poor. They did it all based on faith and hope and a courageous love that knew no bounds.

Followers of Christ have asked, “Where and how do we go from here,” time and time again over the past 2000 years, and the Spirit has answered. For the Desert Fathers and Mothers, it was to create spiritual havens and training centers within the decadent Roman Empire; for Saints Francis and Clare, it was to create a counter-culture of oneness and love within a violent, materialistic society; for Southern black churches, it was to create a movement to overcame white supremacists who oppressed them.

Today is a day of celebration because we can count on the same Spirit to come to us now in our need for guidance and strength. So let us set anxiety and negativity aside and prepare a space within us for the Spirit to fill. Let us worship with trust and praise...

[the sermon begins below]

Where and How Do We Go from Here? Part II

“Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Yes, but sometimes I wish Margaret Mead had kept that wisdom to herself. It feels like too much responsibility when the odds of having any effect seem insurmountable, or when I feel tired or discouraged.

The church has often responded to the Pentecost story in a similar way.

If ever an event proved the truth of Margaret Mead’s adage, it was Pentecost. The congregation in the room that day was the size of our church mailing list—about one hundred and twenty. Their teacher had been arrested, publicly tortured and executed, they were in constant danger, they were fishermen and carpenters, disenfranchised women and disrespected men, yet from that small tired, overwhelmed and discouraged group grew the most powerful, joyful movement for social change in history, shaping empires and improving the lives of countless millions.

People say that no person changed history more than Jesus, but he couldn’t have made a lasting difference without that first small group of committed people.

Every Pentecost we read this story, and we love it, but if you are like me, another part of our response is avoidance of the truth that Pentecost exuberantly shouts in every language, saying “Praise God—the Spirit changed the world through us, and now it wants to do it through you!”

To be honest, I don’t want to hear that right now. It’s been a rough fourteen months and I’m tired and I already have too much to do. I just want to get back to the good feeling of our beloved sanctuary on a Sunday morning. I just want the comfort of our loving community around me.

I don’t want to hear the Spirit pounding on our door with its blasts of wind, I don’t want to be set on fire by its urgency and enthusiasm, I don’t want to speak through the open window of technology into the street below.

And I don’t want to listen to the voices that say it’s now or never, that there will be no other generation to solve the problems, that it is up to us to save our democracy and save humanity from extinction. I’m trying not to notice that groups of committed white supremacist Christian nationalists and climate deniers are working fanatically to retake control of Congress and the White House, and they are gaining ground every day.

I'm burned out, and besides, what can I do, what could our church do with massive corporations and almost half the nation against us?

And then along comes Pentecost, insisting that we have no idea what we could do if we opened to the Spirit. We could find ourselves speaking a new language, suddenly eloquent and compelling to people who scoffed at us before. We could find just the vision we need. We could have a dream that inspires the world.

Remember Martin Luther King Jr. sitting alone at his kitchen table at midnight, exhausted, despairing, fearing for the safety of his wife and new baby with more death threats every day. In that hour King told God that he could not go on, and yet just a few years later he stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial saying, "I have a dream," and President Lyndon Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and in January of 2020 children stood in our sanctuary and recited passages from the "I Have a Dream" speech because they still dream that dream. And do you remember that we gathered after worship that Sunday, a small group of committed citizens, and felt the Spirit moving our congregation toward doing antiracism work and becoming officially open to and affirming of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities?

How was King transformed from an exhausted, discouraged man alone in the darkest night into a towering beacon of light that is still inspiring us to action? He was transformed because in that moment when he could not see where or how he could go from there the Spirit came to him as at Pentecost saying, get up, Martin, keep going, and I will be with you all the way.

Bruce Nelson is part of our congregational family. He is a retired Dartmouth history professor who has sung in our choir on Martin Luther King Jr. Sundays and spoken to us of his experience in Selma in 1965. Bruce likes to quote Ella Baker who said, "Martin didn't make the movement, the movement made Martin." The same Spirit that spoke through King worked through small local groups of committed citizens, congregations like ours, and together they changed the world.

We may be tired, overbusy and discouraged, but the Spirit can work with that. We may not see what we can do, but when turning points of history have come in the past, in the last days young people have seen visions and old people dreamed dreams, and humanity has evolved.

This is what the Spirit of the universe needs to do through us now in order to save the life on earth that it created. The Pentecost story asks us to trust that if we open to the Spirit, we will receive the guidance and strength we need.

Remember, too, the wisdom of the apostle Paul. We do not have to do everything, we just have to contribute our part. ***Collectively***, we are the body of Christ. ***Individually***, all we have to be is a foot or an ear or one little finger of that body. No contribution is too small. The Spirit uses what seems foolish or weak to overcome what seems insurmountable.

Where and how do we go from here? The first followers of Jesus had to invent what the church would be, and right now every church including ours is faced with the challenge of reinventing itself. The world has changed, our lives have changed and the Spirit needs the church to change in response.

How can we open and attune ourselves more deeply to the Spirit's guidance and power? How can we more completely dedicate our lives and church to saving the good and beautiful things of this earth that are now in danger? How can we help people outside the church to open to the Spirit within them, so together we can form a small group of committed citizens to change this world?

Let us pray in silence, lifting these questions to God and opening to the Spirit to give us the answers we need...

A Haiku by Mel Goertz:

The apple trees have opened.
Hummingbirds revel
among the blossoms.