

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's Sermon for Pentecost

In his inspiring sermon for Pentecost, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry of the US Episcopal Church speaks of how we may be redeemed in the face of the pandemic and of the human pandemic of self-centredness that culminated in the murder of George Floyd.

It is worth watching the sermon itself which can be viewed in full [here](#) (the page also contains resources for Responding to Racist Violence).

Pentecost in a Pandemic

And now in the name of our loving, liberating and life-giving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, amen.

Today is the day of Pentecost, sometimes referred to as the birthday of the church, the beginning of the Jesus movement being launched into the world. When the Spirit of God, the same spirit that rested upon Jesus, when the spirit of God rested upon those first gathered apostles and followers. It was the beginning of what we call the church, this movement of those who follow Jesus. But this year, we observe Pentecost in the midst of a pandemic, and that's what I'd like to talk with you about for a few moments. Pentecost in a pandemic.

For a text, the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 5:

We. . . boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (who) has been given to us.

The old spiritual says it this way. If you cannot preach like Peter and you cannot pray like Paul, just tell the love of Jesus how he died to save us all. There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

Pentecost in a pandemic. We really do observe this Pentecost in the midst of a pandemic. The pandemic of COVID-19 is real. It is painful. And we pray that scientists and researchers and all of the folk who are working hard will find a way to bring this pandemic to an end. But there's another pandemic, not of the viral kind, but of the spiritual kind. It is a pandemic of the human spirit, when our lives are focused on ourselves, when the self becomes the centre of the world and of the universe. It is a pandemic of self-centeredness. And it may be even more destructive than a virus.

This pandemic of self-centeredness, if you will, has been the root cause of every humanly created evil that has ever hurt or harmed any child of God or even the earth itself. James, in the Epistle says, and I quote, "What causes wars? What causes fighting among you? Is it not the passions that are at war in your own members? You desire and do not have, so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and wage war." That is the pandemic of selfishness, of self-centeredness. It is the pandemic where I am the centre of the universe and if I'm the centre of the universe, then everybody else and everything else, including you, is the periphery.

And that pandemic is the root cause of every humanly created evil that has ever been made. Every war that has ever been fought, every bigotry, every injustice, every wrong that has ever been wrought. Anytime a human being has hurt another human child of God directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, at the root cause is me being the centre of the world and you on the periphery. Dr. Martin Luther King called this the reverse Copernican Revolution. Where not the sun is the center of the universe, but the self. Love is the antidote to that. Love is the cure for that. Love is what can help us remove that way of living and establish a way of life where we find life for us all.

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and you cannot pray like Paul,
just tell the love of Jesus,
how he died to save us all.*

There is the balm in Gilead that can make the wounded whole. There is the balm in Gilead that can heal the sin-sick soul. There is a cure for that pandemic. Unselfish sacrificial love. If you listen to the writer of the spiritual, that's what they grasped. Jesus didn't die for himself, he died for others. He died for the good and the well-being of others, not for anything that he could get out of it. It was an unselfish act, if you will, a sacrificial act. And it is that way of unselfish, even sacrificial living that has the innate spiritual capacity to actually save and help us all.

Jesus following the teachings of Moses told us long ago, you shall love the Lord your God and your neighbour as yourself. To love God and love the neighbour and genuinely to love the self. Not prideful false self-love, but genuinely to love the self. That is the way. That's the way to life. Not just for us individually, but for us corporately as a society and us globally as a global human family. Love is the way. It is not a mere utopian dream. It is our hope. Our only hope. And it is the cure for this pandemic caused by the human spirit.

But let no one deceive you. This is not cheap grace or sugar-coated religion. It's not easy. It's not easy to live an unselfish life. It's not easy. And the truth is, much that we see around us is the fruit of this unhealthy self-centeredness. Seemingly ruling the day. But again, the spiritual may help us here. The singer said it this way,

*Sometimes I feel discouraged,
and think my life's in vain,
but then the Holy Spirit
revives my soul again.*

*There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole.
There is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.*

Love is the way, but we don't always have the power to live that way. But the spirit of the living God does have that power, because I think if I read my Bible correctly, 1st John chapter 4, it says, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God and those who love are born of God and know God, because God is love." If God is love, and the Spirit of God is the spirit of God's essence and life and heart, then when that spirit is poured out on us, the very love that is the heart of God is being poured out on us and love becomes possible. But it's hard.

This past week, we have not only had to endure a pandemic occasioned by a virus, a viral pandemic, but we've had to endure and face a spiritual pandemic. The roots of self-centeredness where one person can look upon another person and despise and reject them, and not even behold them as a fellow child of God. We have seen once again the unthinkable become thinkable. It's caused great pain or better yet, on Earth, the great pain that was already there.

In Minnesota, the killing of George Floyd was a violation of basic human decency and dignity. And we all saw it. We all saw it. Maybe the deeper pain that comes with that is that that wasn't an isolated incident. It happened to Breonna Taylor on March 13th in Kentucky. It happened to Ahmaud Arbery on February 23rd in Georgia. And need I mention Melissa Ventura, Paul Castaway, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin? This is a painful path that we have been on for a long time. We've made such progress in our human relationships and in our racial relationships, and yet this seems not to have changed at all.

I'm 67 years old. In the late 1960s and early 70s when I was a teenager, the same thing was going on then. My father who was an Episcopal priest, rector of St. Philip's in Buffalo, also served not only as a parish priest but as the director of human relations for the city of Buffalo. And in that capacity after riots in the 1960s, he was brought on board and brought others on board to lead sensitivity training sessions for police officers in the Buffalo police force. That was necessary because some of the riots that were occasioned resulted from precisely the same thing that happened just this past week in Minneapolis.

I was a teenager then and it was going on then. I was a teenager when my father warned me when I learned how to drive, that if ever you have encounters with the police, obey, do what they say. Do not talk back and watch how you move your hands. I was told that in the 1960s and we're still having to say it today. That's where some of the anger and the frustration that we're seeing on our streets is coming from. It's accumulated hurt and disappointment. But not just for those on the streets, for people of goodwill and human decency of all races, of all stripes, of all religions, of all kinds.

There is a part of us that just wants to throw up our hands, and in the words of the Psalmist cry, how long? How long oh, Lord? How long? And yet, we are not victims of fate. We are people of faith. We are not doomed and condemned to continue our past into our present and future. We need not be slaves of fate. We follow in the footsteps of Jesus. And this Jesus taught us that love will make a way out of no way. He taught us that sometimes you have to take up the cross and follow in his footsteps. And that if you dare to follow his way of love, you will find God's way of life. We will not submit to fate. We must not give in to fate. We must dare to follow Jesus in the way of love that can save us all.

But I don't have the power to do that all the time. And I suspect, neither do you. But God does. And that's why the singer of the spiritual had a verse that said,

*Sometimes I feel discouraged,
and (I) think my life's in vain,
but then th(at) Holy Spirit
(It) revives my soul again.*

*There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole.
There is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.*

Love is the way. It can save us all. And maybe we've seen a sign of it. And maybe we've seen evidence that by the power of the spirit, we might be able to do it.

Public health officials have told us that we all need to start wearing these when we go out in public. These face masks. And it's interesting, when you put the face mask on, it's not fun to wear. They've told us that you're really putting it on not to save yourself. You're not putting it on to protect yourself. The reason for wearing the face mask is I wear it so that I don't spread anything to you. I wear it to protect you. It's a small inconvenience, a little sacrifice that actually may be a symbol of what it means to love. And the possible miracle could be that if I wear to protect you from me, and you wear it to protect me from you, or the virus within you, we get protected and we all win. And that is the power of love.

If I make room for you, and you make room for me, and if we will work together to create a society where there is room for all of God's children, where every human being, every one of us is treated as a child of God, created in the image and likeness of God, where everybody is loved, everybody is honoured, everybody is respected, everybody is created as a child of God. If we work together to build that kind of society and don't give up, then love can save us all.

*If you cannot preach like Peter,
and you cannot pray like Paul,
just tell the love of Jesus,
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*There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole.
There (really) is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.*

So, walk together children. And don't you get weary because there is a great camp meeting in the promised land.