

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed, alleluia!)
Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This pandemic that we are still dealing with has thrown a monkey wrench into our way of life. For many people, that has not been a good thing, at least not in the short term. If it brings meaningful change for the better to our collective way of life then it might turn out to be a good thing in the long run. I am hopeful, but not optimistic. Whatever the long term brings, though, there will be pain for many in the short term. And that's putting it rather nicely. Those of us who are not as hard hit will do well to bear that in mind in the weeks and months to come. Our reality is not the reality of everyone around us. Paying attention to that will open our eyes, and maybe – God grant – our hearts, to the suffering of our neighbor.

The disruption to my own life has not been all that bad. Yes, there was a learning curve to moving our worship online, as well as our meetings and classes. Yes, I did have six Zoom meetings in one day this past week over a twelve-hour period. Yes I had to miss my favorite conference, and even more disappointing, we've had to cancel our planned trip to Moldova this summer. But on the whole, I really can't complain. And some of the disruption for me has been welcome. For some reason, let's call it inspiration, I decided to pick up one of classic Russian novels that I had never read and give it a go. I started in the evening, with not very good light and very small text, and was having a hard time. Then I remembered that we had a Russian edition somewhere, so I went and found that. The text was bigger, but my Russian has atrophied, so that was slow going. So I ended up reading a bit in English, and then going back over the section in Russian. And this is when I was reminded what a task it is to translate from one language to another. It's not just decoding. If you translate a folk expression that depends on a very different context, you can get the words literally correct, but end up with something that is incomprehensible to your reader. Choices have to be made, choices that depend upon knowing both the original context, and the context of the target audience. For instance, at breakfast, the hero of the novel I'm reading had "pancakes." He took three of them, rolled them up together, and dipped them in butter. Which sounds bizarre, until you realize that Russian "pancakes" are really very thin little things that are normally eaten rolled up. Maybe not always three at a time, but you can imagine doing that with a Russian pancake, but not really an American one. I think I would have translated this as crepes, but maybe that's too fancy a term for the Russian reality.

It was this recent experience with translation that came to mind when I started to consider this morning's Pentecost text from Acts. It set me to wondering whether those mini-sermons of the disciples to their foreign-speaking brothers and sisters used the idioms and imagery of their own context, and whether the disciples understood what they were saying. Did their sudden ability to speak foreign words also come with a sudden new understanding of context of their audience? In other words, was this just a momentary, superficial display for the sake of a good story – for the sake of performing an impressive miracle? Or did the disciples also come to know better the people they were speaking to by the sudden ability to speak their language?

Whatever the case, they were clearly preaching differently to their foreign brothers and sisters than that sermon Peter preached to the home crowd, who had no idea what was going on. The foreign audiences got to hear immediately of God's deeds of power in ways that made sense to them, while the local folks were kind of clueless. They immediately assumed the worst, and had to be told that the disciples weren't drunk. The foreigners knew they weren't drunk, or crazy, because they could understand what they were saying.

All of this was running around my brain as I read the news this past week of yet another black man carelessly or callously killed in police custody, and the reactions to that killing over the past few

days, both in the Twin Cities and across the country. Especially interesting to me as a white person, and as a pastor to mostly white people, have been the reactions of people like me to this ongoing crisis. They fall roughly into two categories. One is the outcry against injustice – the indignation that such a thing could happen, and with that the call to reform our policing policies, including weeding out the bad cops, so that things like this stop happening with such maddening frequency. The other is the outcry against the rioting and looting that shifts attention from the brutal misconduct of the police officers involved to the misbehavior of some of those protesting the misconduct, and that ignores or simply refuses to acknowledge our deeper, systemic problem of race. “As soon as you start rioting,” they declare, “your cause loses all credibility,” not noticing how they have lumped “those people” into a single category, responsible for the behavior of everyone who looks like them, while at the same time allowing for a few “bad apples” in a what they believe to be basically good police force.

Both of these approaches, it turns out, have the virtue of distancing the ones taking them from the underlying problem. They don’t include themselves as part of the problem. They get to point the finger at others while feeling good about themselves. As I’ve said in the past, Lutherans are particularly well-equipped to navigate situations like this, if only we will pay attention to our theological tradition. Next week we will return to using the brief order of confession and forgiveness at the beginning of our services, in which we acknowledge that we are in captivity to sin and cannot free ourselves. Racism is part and parcel of that sin. It is not something that some have and others are free of. Racism is woven into the warp and woof of our culture. It’s part of who we are. *Everyone* participates in it and helps perpetuate it, even people of color, and it’s not unique to American culture, although it’s not my place and beside my point to explore those topics. The point is, we all, to one degree or another, buy into the assumption that white people are in some way superior, and people of color in some way inferior, and it infects every aspect of our communal life. And there is no quick fix, no vaccine, no magic pill that will rid us of it. We are in captivity to sin, brothers and sisters, and cannot free ourselves.

Today we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, the day that God continued God’s presence among us after Jesus’ ascension, by sending upon us the gift of God’s self in the Holy Spirit. This is part of a pattern of God’s activity that I want us to notice. The whole trajectory of God’s work in and through Jesus and continuing with the sending of the Holy Spirit is *toward* us sinful human beings and *not* away from us. In Jesus, God does not sit apart from us casting down judgment and punishment from on high. That is what *we* do when we blame others for the problems of the world. But our ways are not God’s ways. Instead, God moves toward us and our sin in Jesus Christ, taking our sin upon himself, even becoming sin for us, as Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians, in order to free us from our captivity to sin and death and open for us the way to life that is really life.

The Holy Spirit, whose sending we celebrate today, continues that trajectory of God’s movement toward us, so that we might become part of God’s movement towards others as well. And that gets us back to the matter of translation that was such a crucial part of the first Pentecost. Translation is how you move toward someone who is different from you. It helps you understand not just how they talk, but who they are. It draws you into their reality, make you understand them, empathize with them, and to see them as brothers and sisters, rather than “those people.” It helps us recognize them as fellow sinners, just as much in need of God’s love and forgiveness, those “powerful deeds of God” that the disciples proclaimed in all those different languages.

I’ll say it again. There is no quick fix to the problem of sin in any of its distressing manifestations. But the sending of the Holy Spirit is the promise that God does not abandon us to the consequences of our sin, but continues to move toward us, sharing our lives with us, in all our joys and sorrows, so that we might move toward one another and share in each others lives, in joy and in sorrow. May we trust that glorious promise and life in hope. Any may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus throughout whatever is yet to come. Amen.