

‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” John 7:37-39; Acts 2:1-13
Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church in Camden UCC, May 31, 2020 -Pentecost

Acts 2:21-21: When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” ¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

John 7:37-39: On the last day of the festival¹, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

We celebrate Pentecost today which tells of people from many places coming together beyond division. They are changed and bound together by a new narrative of the good news of God’s redeeming love for a hurting world. On Pentecost we also celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the amazing, uniting and enlivening energy of God. We are literally remembering today how we are inspired, that is, breathed into life, guided and sustained by God at every moment. We

¹ This was the Feast of Tabernacle (also known as Festival of Booths), a harvest pilgrimage festival. In time, the festival became not only a celebration of the harvest but also of the story of God’s gracious providence as the Israelites journeyed through the desert after their release from slavery in Egypt. The festival involved libations (water rituals). Now Jesus refers to himself as the source through which the healing and sustaining water can be received and passed on.

hear this good news amidst what has been arguably one of the saddest and most troubling weeks in our country's recent history. We have surpassed the official 100,000 mark of deaths from COVID 19 (which could be higher), a disease that leaves most of its victims dying while desperately seeking to breathe. We have witnessed how yet another unarmed black man, George Floyd, was killed in police custody while pleading with officers for help as he could not breathe.² The juxtaposition of "inspiration" and "expiration" could not be more potent and timely.

We have probably all seen the troubling images of George Floyd lying on the ground handcuffed with white police officer, Derek Chauvin, pressing his knee into Floyd's neck. Floyd had been arrested after supposedly using a fake \$20 bill to buy cigarettes.³ The arrest supposedly involved some resistance.⁴ Chauvin kept his knee on Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes, refusing to budge despite repeated and desperate pleas by Floyd to give him room to breathe. Chauvin kept pressing even over two minutes after Floyd had become unresponsive. When Floyd was pleading for air, Chauvin responded with something like, "You are talking just fine." Floyd even called out to his mother who had died 2 years ago. At least one of the other officers was heard voicing some concern but did not act to change the situation. Pleas from bystanders were ignored. Early autopsy results suggest that other health issues like hypertension may have contributed to Floyd's death in this stressful time of assault on him. Regardless of such findings, Floyd should not have been handled in this way and should not have died. Once again, a white officer used excessive force that caused the needless death of an African-American.

² *After George Floyd's Suffocation: A Litany for Oxygen* by Patrick Saint-Jean, SJ, posted May 29, 2020 <https://thejesuitpost.org/2020/05/after-george-floyds-suffocation-a-litany-for-oxygen-from-a-black-jesuit/?fbclid=IwAR0oIl3Vnp8YYR66R9Houccc6D5AqoK1FNyh3wsvtXdxqSeGnp1CE2Nxy0#.XtIg-LA6rFM.facebook>. Saint-Jean names Eric Garner and others who died unable to breathe.

³ New York Times, *What Happened in the Chaotic Moments Before George Floyd Died*, May 30, 2020.

⁴ Floyd may have been drinking but was also coherent enough in his pleas for help. Though their paths may not have crossed in person. Chauvin and Floyd had ironically both worked at the same night club as security guards for a while though on different nights. Chauvin was known to cross the line occasionally, particularly with black customers on that job. See article listed in #3.

Since Floyd's death, a police precinct has gone up in flames and hundreds of stores have been destroyed in Minneapolis.⁵ Violent clashes have been spreading across the country as the anger and frustration of Blacks and many others have once again reached the boiling point. President Trump stated outrage at the treatment of Floyd, called for a fast investigation but was also quick to tweet, "When the looting starts, the shooting starts."⁶ The president has since once again tried to change the story about what he meant by his comments. It is hard to find his denials credible.

These killings do call on us to ask ourselves what narratives we live by, who benefits from them and who doesn't. Were we not just talking about this a few weeks ago in light of the murder of Ahmaud Arbery? Dr. Eddie S. Claude Jr. addressed all this passionately during an interview on the PBS News Hour this past Friday night (May 29, 2020). He is the chair of the African American Studies Department at Princeton University. Dr. Claude named that the anger that has been unleashed over the killing of George Floyd is not just some spontaneous explosion but a reflection of accumulated outrage and grievances. Dr. Claude points out that all the riots of past decades had some connection with brutality unleashed on Black people at the hands of authorities, most often police. The distrust has become deep although, of course, the vast majority of police officers serve honorably under difficult circumstances. Still, far more often than not, perpetrators of violence, whether police or self-appointed vigilantes, have gotten away with these crimes outright or been acquitted in court. Recently, the availability of video footage has spread the news and forced the issue in new ways, spurring outrage, confrontation, and in some cases violence.

For Dr. Claude, people of color have grown tired of being asked to bracket and domesticate their anger when things just don't change. Claude is no fan of violent protest but he also won't allow the attention to that violence (and occasions of looting) to eclipse the underlying issues that

⁵ Many small business owners saw their livelihood destroyed while large department stores received extensive police protection.

⁶ Whether knowingly or not, he was drawing on a statement from 1967 made then by Walter Headley, then police chief of Miami. Hedley was also known to say, "We don't mind being accused of police brutality. They haven't seen anything yet." New York Times, 'Looting' Comment From Trump Dates Back to Racial Unrest of the 1960s by Michael Wines, May 29, 2020.

spawned such actions. He makes the case that righteous anger announces to us that something has just happened that is not acceptable and that things need to change. Being able to express the anger is a pre-condition for the needed correction of the larger systemic issues that underlie the grievances.

While many diverse people suffer amidst poverty, I find myself unable to dismiss Dr. Claude's point that we are dealing with inequities that have left certain populations, especially African-Americans, disproportionately living in under-resourced communities without a decent chance for a living wage, equal education, adequate housing or health care.⁷ The Pandemic has only increased the level of pressure, pain and stress on marginalized communities. Add to that the tinder of racist violence and you get a conflagration. Can those of us who are white really deny that Black people are still suffering and dying needlessly because of the color of their skin and the prejudices they face? How do you make sense of what keeps happening?

I found myself deeply stirred and troubled by the interview with Dr. Eddie Claude. He went on to say that we are still plagued by an underlying narrative of America being a "white nation" that is shaped by the values of Old Europe. This narrative presumes that the values, stories, and ambitions of one group can set the tone of an entire culture's ethics and identity. So many of us are unconsciously participating in or benefitting from this habituated narrative whether we intend to or not. We often don't have a reason to think about it because of our own privilege. Unfortunately, our political leadership at the top does not do its part to counteract this narrative, quite to the contrary and to all our peril.⁸

Of course, "white" values, stories and ambitions are in themselves not entirely homogenous and certainly not always harmful but I think Eddy Claude's point is well taken.⁹ He passionately appealed further that we cannot allow people, "to double-down on ugly commitments" such as old

⁷ Of course, some of these inequities affect other groups as well. As mentioned in recent week, the Pandemic unveils the disproportionate suffering of Native Americans, African Americans and Latinos in this country.

⁸ I believe those of us who are white tend to forget or underrate the amount of violence inflicted centuries ago in the establishment of this nation.

⁹ We sadly have plenty of stories of scape-goating based on different European ethnic backgrounds as different groups fought for dominance. I must also name that Asian Americans suffer from their own share of prejudice.

notions of entitlement and white power accompanied by destructive narratives of the inferiority of others. Black men (but also women) in particular find themselves branded automatically as a threat, as inferior, and as not deserving of the same dignity afforded to others.¹⁰ Too often African Americans also suffer disproportionately from crack downs regarding societal ills like drug abuse that don't address the reasons as to why people self-medicate in the first place.¹¹

This pandemic is showing us the beauty of people reaching out to each other in their shared humanity and suffering. But it also reveals to us the injustices that are crippling us. I know we have many white people here in Maine who continue to work hard under hard circumstance and are also impacted by poverty and lack of fair wages and such. Many of our essential workers are not paid equitably for the work they do regardless of the color of their skin. Many ambulance drivers can't even afford health care coverage (recent report on the PBS News Hour), together with nursing home staff and grocery clerks. Yes, all lives matter and we can address our common ills together! Meanwhile, people of color are being burdened by additional dimensions of injustice and projections that bear addressing and clearly leave most feeling like their lives don't matter.

As we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit on this day of Pentecost, we are reminded that the Holy Spirit reframes and reorders the question of who we are and how we are in relationship to each other and with God. Part of the Good News of this story of Pentecost is that love and belonging can be known and spoken in all languages, by people of all ages, and regardless of their status. The people mentioned in the context of the passage from the Book of Acts were all of Jewish descent though they came from many places. It would take the early church time to understand that the Holy Spirit was equally at work among non-Jews – this became the focus and call of Paul's mission. The God of liberation we know in Jesus Christ is not a tribal God who privileges the dominance of one people over others – though such destructive narratives were at times part of the biblical witness and sadly became embedded again in the Christian tradition.

¹⁰One of my friends from the *Living School* is from Trinidad. Philip had a successful job here in this country but consciously decided to return to Trinidad because he did not want his sons to continue to be exposed to prejudice against people of color.

¹¹The “stop and frisk policy” in NYC under Bloomberg's mayoral tenure reminds us of this.

And while the notion that young and old, male and female, slave and free would be able to have visions and dream dreams is in many ways beautiful, the text from the Book of Acts (and the Bible at large) does not challenge the legacy of slavery that had been plaguing humanity for centuries even then. We are still not finished with this distortion.¹² In contrast, the story of Christ's life, death and resurrection fundamentally proclaims that God becomes identified with those who are oppressed, marginalized, brutalized and demeaned. God is present on the cross with every black child, man or woman who has been discriminated against and brutalized, no matter what the source or the form of violence this has entailed.¹³

It strikes me that the Holy Spirit is right now inviting us to learn to listen to God's language in several ways. One is the clear message that every creature is a manifestation and a gift from God. Every human being is of equal dignity and worth regardless of all the artificial categories we create, race included. We are all humans. Period. The fact that we are still talking about race is necessitated by the suffering that has arisen from our artificial distinctions like race in the first place. Those who are suffering need to hear that they matter, that God is with them in this suffering, and that they equally manifest God regardless of the color of their skin.

What might become possible if we learned to hear the language of the Gospel in a new way through the voices and language of those who are brutalized? How did Ahmaud Arbery, Breanna Taylor, George Floyd and all others who have been victims of violence experience our common life? What would actual justice in light of their suffering look like? What measures are needed when too many of us are not listening and still living by false narratives? Though consequences for individuals and their actions are necessary and just, what will happen if we stop there? Will the zip code in which we live and the color of our skin continue to be a main predictor of much we and our children will thrive? Will things fundamentally change if we settle for blaming a few and calling them "monsters" or "thugs"? I wonder if that would not allow us to remain satisfied with a false sense of order without the needed internal and external change.

¹² We all know that the Bible was quoted by both sides in the abolitionist debate, both to condemn and to justify slavery.

¹³ God is also present with people dying alone in hospital rooms during this pandemic. The list goes on...

The Gospel suggests that God does not wish for us the fires and tongues of flame born of violent outrage or war though they have become the fruit of oppression. God is dreaming of fires of creativity, passion, collaboration, affirmation and thriving to come over us. The Holy Spirit carries a lot of force and energy for the good if we can tune into it and ride with it. It requires of us a willingness to join Christ in dying to all crippling narratives and projections and destructive. We are called to rise to newness of life. Christ says in our passage from the Gospel of John that when we are attuned and connected to him and his way of pouring himself out in love, rivers of living water can flow from our hearts. Let us seek to enter this flow, whatever the cost, even if it takes letting go of false privilege, for the sake of the whole. May the Spirit guide and sustain us.