

May 20, 2018

Pentecost

Acts 2: 1-21

Prayer: Dear Lord, Please go with us into the study of the story of Pentecost. Help us to dream about the radical inclusion that this story portended, and then to make that dream reality. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Out of Alabama

Three weeks ago, Donna and Jim Rogers of this congregation had Peace Center tickets and couldn't go. So Vince and I got to see the Blind Boys of Alabama.

Vince tried to get me to call their manager and see if they'd sing in here the next morning. But even my nerviness has its limits.

But oh my goodness, I would have loved for you to hear them! If you're not familiar with them, the Blind Boys are five-time Grammy winners who have been singing gospel since 1939. They walked onto the Peace Center amphitheater stage in a human caravan, each with his hand on the shoulder of the man in front of him, five elderly men in red jackets, black trousers and shiny black shoes.

They sang their rocking version of "If I Had a Hammer" that Sammy and Ollie gave us a taste of. And they sang "Amazing Grace" to the tune of "House of the Rising Sun."

I don't think I've ever appreciated the lyrics quite as much as when I heard those gravelly voices sing, "How precious did that grace appear, The hour I first believed."

Growing up during the Great Depression, these men were blind, African-American males in the Deep South during the Jim Crow years. They were sent to a school for the blind where the expectation was that they would make brooms or mops for a living.

Instead, they became one of the most influential groups who ever sang -- touring and recording for more than 70 years now. Only two of the original members are still alive, but even the newcomers are elderly. They sit in chairs throughout most of their sets.

I cannot see black men of that age, of that place, without thinking what they must have endured during their lifetime. What they must have faced.

The truth of what they faced opened in their home state just two days before they played our Peace Center. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice opened on six acres overlooking the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery. It is dedicated to all the victims of racial lynching in this nation.

As a nation, we have not dealt with this aspect of our history. It could be because it stretched on for so long – eight decades, from 1877 to 1950. So it wasn't a single act such as Custer's Last Stand or the Alamo or the plane attacks on the World Trade Center. It was a way of life that we accepted.

Bryan Stevenson, the founder and director of the Equal Justice Initiative that is behind the memorial, worked with other lawyers to uncover 4,400 individual lynching cases. So far. Those cases were spread throughout the nation, but concentrated most heavily in the South,

including 180 right here in South Carolina. On one of the walls of the memorial are inscribed these words:

For the hanged and beaten,

For the shot, drowned and burned.

For the tortured, tormented and terrorized.

For those abandoned by the rule of law,

We will remember.

The Montgomery memorial includes several parts – the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, built on the ground where a slave warehouse stood. A bronze statue showing chained slaves. Another haunting sculpture showing black bodies, hands raised, rising from an elongated block of stone.

But the piece that caught my attention was one that included 800 weathered steel columns. A visitor approaches them head on and can read the county and the names where lynchings occurred. But then the ground begins to dip and the pathway plunges downward. And soon the visitor is under the 800 columns, so that they approximate brown bodies, swinging above. Billie Holliday's *strange fruit*.

When I read about the new monument, I thought *That sounds like the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe that I saw in Berlin*. I talked about it last summer when I returned from sabbatical. That site is in the middle of Berlin, and when you approach it, it looks like a

giant graveyard dotted with granite slabs. But then you take a path that leads you deep inside until those slabs tower above you, blocking daylight, menacing.

And indeed, when I read further, I learned that the memorial in Alabama was based on Berlin's Memorial to Murdered Jews AND to the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, South Africa.

The link is intentional. All three of these memorials are designed to make us face an appalling part of our past. I don't think we've equated our racial lynchings with the Holocaust, with state-sponsored apartheid. But perhaps it's time we did.

For these lynchings were not all performed in the dead of night by the Ku Klux Klan. Many were openly planned and executed as public spectacles – for up to 15,000 men, women and children to witness.

Like the crucifixions of Jesus' day were designed to quell uprisings against the Roman Empire, America's public lynchings were designed to quell the seeking of education, better pay, voting rights, any kind of parity with white Americans.

We dedicated a baby today. How I wish little Walter could grow up in a nation free of racism! But if he cannot, at least I hope he can grow up to face it honestly, to learn what it has meant to this country, to learn what it has meant to an entire group of people.

Some Christian churches have been in the forefront of facing our history. Sadly, not all of them, nor even enough of them. Which is ironic because the church was born in a rush of

radical inclusion that would make us think any kind of racism or sexism or ageism or culturism would be banished from that day forward.

Today is Pentecost, the birthday of the church. If you'd like to read about that day, turn in your Bibles to **Acts 2: 1-21**. This story occurred during the Jewish festival of Pentecost. So we co-opted the name and celebrate it 50 days after Easter.

2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they (the disciples) 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.

⁵ Now 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.'

14 But 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.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

At this point, the Holy Spirit is speaking only to Jews from all these countries. The spread of the word to Gentiles will come later in the book of Acts.

But look at Peter's first sermon. He quotes the prophet Joel, saying that the Spirit will be poured onto both men *and* women who will then prophesy, or preach. The young will see visions, the old will dream. But all, all will be welcome in this church.

Young and old, men and women, slave and free, people from every nation that the writer Luke could think of. All would be welcome in this new church where the Spirit would be poured upon all flesh.

How did we dare create divisions of greater than and lesser than after this incredible beginning? How did we dare?

At the time that Luke wrote Acts, approximately 60 percent of people living in the Roman Empire were slaves. And look what Peter pulls from the prophet Joel: **“Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”**

Even this human construct of slavery shall be equalized in that great gittin' up morning.

Back when I was writer for *The Greenville News*, we once asked our readers to vote on the best little town in South Carolina. Then I would go and spend a few days in that community and write a profile.

The winner was Abbeville. I was delighted because I had spent some summers back in the 1960s in Abbeville and loved it. It was the quintessential small Southern town, a Mayberry of sorts.

When I went back in the '90s to research the story, Abbeville still reveled in its Confederate history. It called itself the Cradle of the Confederacy. Residents took me to a site honored as the birthplace of secession. An imposing Confederate monument rose from the town square.

What no one ever mentioned was the lynching of Anthony Crawford. Crawford was a black cotton farmer in the early 20th century. When a white merchant offered him a low price for his cotton in 1916, he refused to sell it.

He was arrested. Three hundred people pulled him from the jail, dragged his body through town, shot him 200 times, then left him hanging for several days as a warning to other black people. His frightened family fled.

Crawford's was one of the 4,400 lynchings that Bryan Stevenson's team uncovered. Stevenson recently came to Abbeville for a ceremony to dedicate a new marker, for the first time telling the other side of the same story.

If you go to Abbeville today, right on the town square in front of City Hall and the courthouse, you will see the marker for the lynching of Anthony Crawford.

I have the greatest respect for Bryan Stevenson's life work, for the monumental task of freeing wrongly convicted prisoners from Death Row, for the even more monumental task of bringing a nation face to face with its ugly past. For of course, the ugliness was not confined to Alabama. It spread and stained all of us.

Some issues are simply too big for a single church or a single community to take on. After our worship service, you will be invited to write or sign a letter to our legislators to combat hunger nationally and globally.

Because we know there are hungry children in Berea, hungry families in Slater-Marietta, hungry elderly folks in the southern part of the county.

Because we know there is hunger in the United States, where one in six children lives in a family struggling to buy food. And we know there is hunger in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in Ethiopia, in Kenya.

It's fine for charities and individuals to address those needs, as we try to do here. But private citizens cannot do it alone. It takes nations. It takes governments.

And that's why we are participating today in our annual Offering of Letters for Bread for the World. Our own Susan Stall is a national board member and has offered to hand deliver our letters to legislators. These letters are simply non-partisan pleas to Congress to fund programs that feed all of God's children.

We've covered a lot today. I hope no one asks you over lunch what your minister preached on. *Man, she was all over the place from babies to gospel singing to lynching to Pentecost to hunger.*

But here's my story, and I'm sticking to it: The Holy Spirit is all over the place.

The Holy Spirit is all over the place.

The Holy Spirit is all over the book of Acts, and all over our lives today.

So especially on Pentecost Sunday, there is a thread. A thread that unites us all.

The great whoosh of the Holy Spirit insists – insists! -- that we are all welcome in this church of Jesus Christ. And that in being welcomed we take responsibility for one other.

Amen.