

June 9, 2019 Pentecost Happens Now Acts 2:1-21 Rev. Ross Leckie Caledon East UC

What energy the children displayed at the last Messy Church event, about 10 days ago. We were using the theme, "Spirit Alive"-Pentecost. The activities we had them experience brought to life some elements of that memorable gathering in Jerusalem-wind, fire, amazing transformations. We even saw water turned in to wine, or at least with a wine colour.

What excitement there is to this day. The birth of the church! The descent of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had talked about with his disciples, the Counselor, the Advocate. Jesus had said to the disciples, "well, I have to go and you will be glad, for I will send you this most wonderful gift, the Spirit that will be with you forever."

But, just a minute. Would you really want to be there? The rush of a violent wind filling the entire place where they were sitting. Tongues of fire appearing among them and actually resting on them. And then people from entirely different places and thus different native tongues, speaking in other languages. It must have been pandemonium. It must have been amazing!

There was a different sacred fire burning in the far northwest reaches of our country two years ago. This is a picture of the sacred fire lit at the beginning of the national inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Whitehorse, Yukon. This fire was lit before sunrise by an Indigenous firekeeper and it burned until the hearings were over. Our Indigenous people tell us, there are many teachings to be found within the fire. "Such a practice is one of the ways they start a ceremony or any sacred event. It is a spiritual doorway that opens to another spiritual realm so we can communicate and have relations through the fire," says Elder Sherry Copenance. "It is (also) used for our ancestors, the ones who have gone on before us so we can put tobacco in the fire and acknowledge our ancestors." Only sacred items such as tobacco, sage, cedar, and food for ancestors are used. The sacred fire is never left alone. It was watched as long as the inquiry sat, and then when it was time to leave the Yukon, the fire was allowed to go out naturally-the ashes were packaged up and appeared at another amazing event this past Monday, in Ottawa.

Those ashes were used with sacred herbs, to bless the lengthy report from the national inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. That report was bound together and presented to our Prime Minister, swaddled in a traditional Tikinaagan cradle board. There are 231 demands to be addressed to tackle the violence that has seen an untold number of indigenous women and girls murdered or disappear over the decades.

Writer and aboriginal spokesperson, Tanya Talaga offers, "the report says Canada needs to confront the historical disadvantages, intergenerational trauma, and discrimination experienced by indigenous people. It calls for changes in the justice system, policing, social and health services, and education. "An absolute paradigm shift is required to dismantle colonialism in Canadian society."

For me, it is not such a big leap to liken the significance of the Pentecost event with the sacred fire presence, the native drums, singing, and different indigenous languages used in the ceremony on Monday.

The disciples were waiting for the Spirit Jesus promised them. The Spirit, however, did not come in the way they expected, but, rather, made a clamorous entrance during the celebration of a Jewish festival. In this way, we see a spirit that comes at an unpredictable time and interrupts us in the middle

of life. That seems to be the way God acts through those we read about in the Bible, but somehow we want God to talk to us just at about 10:10 am Sunday, not 12:00 am nor Monday or Tuesday for that matter.

And so the possibility of a new understanding and a new relationship comes to us once again, maybe not at the most convenient time, with our indigenous brothers and sisters, but maybe it is God's best time.

The Spirit grants the disciples gifts beyond their ability (speaking in other languages), and the workings of the spirit call into question how we organize our world. Onlookers are beset with questions: their pre-conceived notions challenged and their perceptions called into question. "Amazed and perplexed," they ask each other "What does this mean?" (v. 12). The Spirit also challenges the boundaries between "us" and "them." In other words, how can we understand those people who are different from us? How are they able to speak to us in our own language, share things with us that we understand, and reveal something to us more clearly than we've ever experienced?

We are likewise being challenged about the boundaries between indigenous people and us.

I've been in the presence of the sacred fire. I'm familiar with the smudging ceremony, the medicine wheel, praying in the 4 directions, the burning of sweetgrass in ceremony. I have been amazed at the wisdom and plain speaking shared by Indigenous elders at such times. Those of us at the recent Regional Meeting of 'Shining Waters,' the name for this region of the United Church, had an opportunity to experience once again the sacred fire which burned while our meeting took place. It was tended to by fire keepers at all times. Prayers of challenge, comfort and concern were raised while our deliberations took place.

There is something wrong in our country when so many native women and girls have disappeared without much of a public outcry by the police, the courts, the media. There was something wrong with the way our government and our church participated in the 60s scoop. Some of our ancestors participated in a system which was designed to take the 'Indian' out of the native child. I believe that most of our elders know now that it was wrong and devastating to thousands of our fellow Canadians.

Jesus' followers had come together in one place ready to celebrate Pentecost, a harvest festival, something like our Thanksgiving. A celebration, marking the time when Moses received the Torah, the law, the 10 Commandments from God on Mount Sinai. The festival also marked a new kind of community—a radically different way of living after Egypt.

They probably brought along special food and drink to share, went to the Temple to worship, for prayer and Scripture reading and story-telling. We can imagine that they were talking about the death of Jesus, some 50 days before, at the time of the Passover festival. There may have been high anxiety among them—who might be next. And some of them had been a part of seeing Jesus after death. But those appearances had also died off.

Perhaps they talked about the next steps. Were they just to go back to the way they were before Jesus? Did they ask how they could possibly do that, now that they had a vision given them about the reign of God, a reign of peace and justice and equality? If they were to continue Jesus' mission, how were they to do that?

Then that violent wind came down from heaven. Flames of fire came and a spark rested on each of them and they began to speak in different languages so that the people in the city who heard all the commotion when they came closer heard someone speaking in their own language about God's marvelous deeds. It was like the Tower of Babel story of Genesis, but in reverse—people were no longer confused, but now making sense of one another. The people were amazed and perplexed, some curious, some skeptical and dismissive. Sounds like they're drunk!

What do we make of that radical new way of being called to faith? My favourite theologian, Marcus Borg who died just 4 years ago said, "The central affirmation of Pentecost is that the Spirit promised by Jesus is now present among his followers and in the world. The Spirit is the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ. This claim is foundational to the New Testament and early Christianity."

So the author is presenting in this story of Pentecost, the beginning of humanity coming together—the creation of a new kind of community - the church. The once timid, frightened, and discouraged group of Jesus's followers—his disciples—become forceful, confident, and unified advocates for their experience of the risen Christ, and a new faith movement—and community—was born. So, the following through of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission directions could be our new beginning with those who respect creation and ways we have forgotten. Our native elders accept and teach that we are to provide for 7 generations in to the future. We like to pretend that the earth is ours, or at least those parts of it for which we can produce a piece of paper called a deed. But the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. We and it belong to God. Our Indigenous people remind us of that.

Once again, at Pentecost, for God's people a new beginning was marked. That was fine for a time, but as often happened with God's people on the journey, they soon got off track. So, it is not surprising that the church too has had to be reformed, corrected, changed, brought to a new beginning again and again.

There was another series of events that were highlighted this past week, the marking of 75 years since D-Day landings on French shores began the release of Europe from tyranny. June 6, 1944, when Allied soldiers landed on the Normandy beaches in the largest seaborne invasion ever undertaken, they knew what they were fighting against. They were fighting against dictators and those who were trampling on human rights. They were fighting for democracy and peace.

Today, as we honour the ultimate sacrifice of so many and remember those few who are still with us, we must pledge to uphold the values they fought for. Yet, what do veterans see today? They see the erosion of democratic values that occur when so-called strong men seize power. We must not forget that the world must work together to avoid war and protect human rights.

Today, the very institutions that gave birth to human-rights declarations, environmental accords and agreements to create a more prosperous world are under fire by a new generation of dictators and authoritarians. We live in a time when Jews are being targeted in some parts of the world, mosques are being attacked, churches are being attacked. It has been suggested that those soldiers of old might say, "What the hell have you done with the tomorrows we gave you?"

Let us bring about a Pentecost transformation—We who have let the wind blow the cobwebs and the now irrelevant religious platitudes out of our minds. May these be replaced with a fiery commitment to a gospel of justice, freedom and peace, love and joy. May the Spirit touch our hearts anew, and may we find within us the courage and commitment to share the gospel of love with a hurting world.