

Reflections on “Novel” Pentecost

Bishop Adam J. Richardson, 115

It’s been called “novel” since the scientists first taught us to say COVID-19, the disease that emerges from coronavirus, a respiratory illness with symptoms that often resemble the flu. Who knew just how novel the virus would be, the disruption it would make to our lives, the panic that it would cause, the deaths that would be attributed to it now numbering above 370,000 souls (and 105,000 in the United States) and climbing? Who knew that it would even postpone a General Conference, something so novel that not even Civil War or World Wars had been able to prevent in 50 previous quadrennial gatherings?

On this Pentecost Sunday, the Church is being confronted with matters both old and novel. Novel is defined as “new” or “unusual.” Thus, our ways of congregating over these past months is “novel.” We have reinvented ourselves with an online presence, making use of the latest technologies to preach, teach and minister. This is novel. But we are also confronted with a four-centuries-long ailment, a *virus* that has continually assaulted our humanity in every decade since 1619. It must be respiratory because someone has been saying, in one way or another, “I can’t breathe.” It’s the impact of racism on our collective psyches, the stifling of our creativity, the stealing of our ideas and a country that reaped the benefit of unpaid labor, the limitations on our freedoms (in “the Land of the Free): a rope or a knee on our necks, an attack on our effort at financial independence (Tulsa, Wilmington, et al), a roped-off community for bank loans called red-lining or gerrymandering to suppress our votes. Our collective resilience is cause for observance, if not outright celebration, but for most of our collective history in America its been difficult to breathe.

This Pentecost Sunday, we awake to something novel, three Black people (Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd) have died violently within days of one another. All of them dying at the hands of white police officers (or a retired police officer in the case of Ahmaud Arbery). The knee of Derek Chauvin to the neck of George Floyd seemed to make Colin Kaepernick “taking a knee” all the more relevant again. Chauvin knelt on Mr. Floyd’s neck, rather nonchalantly with his hand in his pocket for nearly nine minutes, as the helpless and handcuffed Floyd pleaded for his life. A 46 year-old man calling for his deceased mother to help him, was not enough to raise the compassion, concern, or the civility of the four police officers in whose custody George Floyd lay face down on the pavement, narrating his own demise — “I can’t breathe.” The moment was reminiscent of Eric Garner dying in an unloving embrace of an unlawful chokehold in Staten Island, New York. “Adding insult to justice,” to use Attorney Ben Crump’s expression, the assailant was exonerated.

Now, nearly every major city across America is on curfew. Peaceful protests have degenerated into acts of violence, fires rage, stores looted, police are challenged, young white demonstrators are carrying signs declaring “Black Lives Matter!” This is “novel.” It seems that the pent-up frustration over the “justice system” and finding legal loopholes to exonerate murderous cops, and the “Safer-at-Home” policies of the health departments, the CDC and the WHO that kept us on “lock down” to mitigate against the spread of the virus since before Easter, was too much to

hold back. The pent-up anger, frustration, and dissatisfaction with unjust resolutions to a series of murders, was too much to hold in; it has erupted into a violent response.

Pentecost, from the perspective of the New Testament is, at least in part, about “breathing.” Fifty days after the Resurrection of Jesus, a fresh wind of the Spirit of God blew upon the gathered followers of Jesus. God “breathed” on them, just as God breathed Life into humankind at Creation, and gave birth to the Church as a vital, living organism. It was God’s respiratory therapy. Perhaps all that is happening in the world of current events might be the emergency room where the Spirit of God is INspiring Respiration and causing the Church to breathe again.

Pentecost is also about “speech.” The book of the Acts of the Apostles (more appropriately known as the Acts of the Holy Spirit) describes the scene in the Upper Room as being ablaze with “tongues of fire.” The 120 congregants of apostles, preachers, soon-to-be deacons, lay persons, relatives of Jesus, a people soon-to-be organized to do ministry, to effectively carry on the work of Jesus, began to speak. The “miracle” of their speaking, however, was that it was not for their personal benefit, but so that those outside of their fellowship could understand the meaning of their experience and the message that they had been entrusted to dispense. They emerged from behind a “closed-door” meeting empowered to speak. They had been sequestered at the behest of Jesus, to wait for the “Promise.” And when they emerged, the newborn congregation came forth speaking — and making sense. And those who heard them had this to say in response to their speech, “How is it that we hear each of them in our native language?”

Martin Luther King, Jr. quipped that “a riot is the language of the unheard.” I have added that it might also be the language of the inarticulate. It is what happens when some of the people are done with talking, when there appears to be a lack of appreciation for what has been spoken. They are not equipped with the gift of language, or they lack the patience to be coherent, and their frustration erupts into a tantrum of destruction. For the Church, we must keep trying to get an audience; trying to be heard. It is our calling to keep revising our methods, not our Message, until the world responds to the modern miracle, in nearly the same way as our ancient forbears, “How is it that we hear each of them in our native language?”

So, on this Pentecost Sunday, forty-nine days since Resurrection Sunday, we pray the words of the hymn, “Breathe on us — again — breath of God.” We pray, “Do the work of Respiration on Your Church, O God, as we emerge from our homes, to fight the good fight of faith, fighting off the infections of coronavirus and racism, injustice and apathy. Inspire us to “speak” Life in word and deed that the world will hear, understand, and believe. This, I believe, will make the Season of Pentecost 2020 Novel.