

**The Feast of Pentecost**  
**Acts 2:21**  
**May 31, 2020**

*“What Is Going On?”*

What is going on? That’s the title for today’s sermon, and it was chosen quite awhile ago – long before the events of this past week. It now seems strangely appropriate. What is going on in our nation in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd in police custody on Memorial Day? The anger and frustration from that has now manifested itself in protests, demonstrations, and marches not only in Minneapolis, but across the nation. Some of these have been peaceful, but others have led to vandalism and violence, as we all have seen. Underneath this is that ugly and painful chapter of race relations in our nation’s history that is yet unfinished; still waiting to be resolved in your life and in mine. In the midst of the great anger, fear, and frustration, we pray: Come, Holy Spirit, come. Bring healing and hope as only you can do. And all of this on top of COVID-19, the economic loss that so many have experienced, and the reopening of our communities. Following the images in the media of overcrowded poolside gatherings over the Memorial Day holiday, it’s important to remember that we still do not have a vaccine for COVID-19. We still do not know for certain if those who have had this are then immune to it. We still do not have widespread testing available on a large-scale. We still have need for greater contact tracing. Caution is still very much in order, even after having been cooped up for more than two months, and especially as we enter into the summer months when we want to get out and go. Here at St. John’s, we are working through what it will take to reopen our church, and I want to commend our Reopening Team for their careful and methodical work here. What we have discovered is that it was much easier to close the church than it will ever be to reopen it. The day is coming when we will, of course, reopen the church for in-person worship services, but even then, not everyone will be comfortable in coming back. I understand and respect that. When we do reopen and you show up for a worship service, you may ask yourself: What is going on? Things will look and feel very different from what we are used to in worship. We will ask everyone to pre-register for worship services, abide by social distancing guidelines, and wear a mask, per the governor’s order. We will not have coffee or the usual refreshments out in the Narthex. We will not have Busy Bags for little ones. We will not have hymnals, Bibles, or items in the pew racks. We may not even have singing. Will we worship? Yes, we will, but it will be different than what we are used to. Different does not have to mean bad; it is simply different. On that first Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the first disciples with the sound of a mighty, rushing wind, with tongues of fire resting upon the disciples, enabling them to speak in other languages, the reaction was exactly this: “What is going on?” With the coming of the Holy Spirit came the fulfillment of the prophet Joel’s words – the Scripture memory verse for this week: **“And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved”** (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21). That is what’s going on, and that question, “What Is Going On?” becomes the theme for preaching on this Feast of Pentecost. May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

The redeeming work of Jesus accomplished through his life and ministry, death and resurrection, has brought about reconciliation between God and people (Ephesians 1:7-10). The temple veil torn asunder at Jesus’ death on the cross (Matthew 27:51) signified that the separation between holy God and sinful people has now bridged through the God-Man, Jesus. The sacrifice for sin has been offered; the debt has been paid – sealed with the cleansing blood the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). But until the coming of the Holy Spirit, the new Israel, those twelve chosen apostles who replaced the twelve tribes of old Israel, remained hesitant and fearful; cautious and uncertain. Maybe we can identify with that. In the world we live in, we may be hesitant and fearful about many things right now, especially with reopening of our communities. But this fearful caution extends to our faith life as well. We may be uncertain and hesitant to talk too much about Jesus. If we do, we risk hostile stares or cutting remarks. And so we keep our faith to ourselves. Conformity to contemporary spiritual and social norms

means that Jesus is not the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), but a way, a truth, and a life. Jesus is seen as one of many divine beings in the pantheon of American religion. Teacher, healer, and mystic, yes. But true God? The atoning sacrifice whose blood covers all our sins (1 John 1:7)? Popular spirituality in our day tells us this isn't true. In fact, popular spirituality at the time of those first disciples and our own popular spirituality is quite similar; which is to say that human nature has changed very little over the millennia. Adam and Eve's original sin – wanting to be God (Genesis 3:1-19) – is still our own sin today. How do we break out of this cycle of fearful hesitancy and cautious uncertainty? Only through the power of the Holy Spirit who calls us and keeps us in the one true faith.

More than thirty years ago, a Christian woman named Gertrud Mueller Nelson wrote the following about the Person and work of the Holy Spirit:

*The Spirit transforms what is just clever into wisdom. 'Advice' is transformed through the Spirit's breath into counsel, comfort and healing. The Spirit illumines the truth so that it can be taken in, understood and integrated, not merely grasped by the mind but known in the heart. The Spirit imbues with meaning what has gone flat and tedious. Working from the inside out, it transforms a life lived 'by the flesh' – a life which does not know its meaning. Motives are clarified and fortified and we stand in right relation to the wonder of the whole. The Spirit quickens what might otherwise remain unmoved. What is ordinary gains a fuller dimension. There is 'nothing new under the sun' until, by the Spirit, we discover it, make it new and integrate it. Old truths are re-inspired and lived. A boring relationship is transformed by the creative. Timidity is inspired to risk. It is dry formality made into a viable form. It is the every-day recreated in an extraordinary way. It is water made wine (To Dance with God: Family Ritual and Community Celebration, Gertrud Mueller Nelson. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986; p. 190).*

What is going on? On this day of Pentecost, it's important to remember that those first disciples did not have a designated building where they met. They were used to worshipping in the temple, but that would soon change. They understood something that we have perhaps forgotten: our faith is founded on a Person, not a place. The church is not a building; the church is the redeemed people of God. Never in Scripture do we read of church described as the building where God's people meet. Nor does Scripture refer to the worship service as church, as in "I'm going to church today." We all long to regather with fellow believers, that is true. There is strength, encouragement, and blessing when God's people come together. But make no mistake about it: the church did not close when stay-at-home orders were put into place over two months ago. You are the church! I am the church! By the grace of God in Jesus Christ, called by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are the church. Some amazing things happened while we have not been able to meet in person: wonderful checking in with members done by many people; virtual meetings that were actually shorter than in-person meetings; doing worship and teaching digitally using technology tools. I really hope and pray that we do not lose any of these things going forward. Regathering in our buildings is important because we need that togetherness as the Body of Christ. That remains true without question. But for the sake of our people, our community, and the kingdom of God, our primary focus and ministry needs to stay outside our church building. Why? Because that is where we come into contact with people who will never enter our church building, and yet they are people for whom Jesus gave his life. That's where Christ needs to be seen. And that is precisely where the Holy Spirit will lead us: out into the world and into the lives of people who are all around us, pointing them, as Peter did with the people in Jerusalem on that first Pentecost, to Jesus, so **"that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved"** (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21). That is what's going on.

May the Holy Spirit who was poured out on Pentecost continue to be poured out on each of our lives today as we carry the good news of Jesus into all the world. Amen.