

A Sermon --- Pentecost, May 23, 2021

**The Giving of the Holy Spirit & Using Covenant to Root Out Racism
Lament + Repent + Covenant**

If we had one of those reader boards where they put up the sermon title, ours would say

Lament, Repent, Covenant – Pentecost and Mr. George Floyd

So, how is it that on this Pentecost, we, in the Diocese of Olympia have been asked by our Bishop, Greg, to “incorporate ‘A Covenant to Root Out Racism’” into our worship today? Tuesday, May 25th is the anniversary of the murder of George Floyd. Today's commemoration comes following the overwhelmingly passed resolution supporting anti-racism at our most recent Diocesan Convention.

The importance of what we are trying to do vies with the difficulties and inevitable clashes that will occur, within and without. It isn't easy. We will make mistakes. May we be courageous and strong enough to ask hard questions and patient enough to listen for a long time.

I am doing this sermon because I have a lot of experience in the kinds of efforts that have NOT yet worked to bring about the change we need.

...over more than 50 years of task forces, committees, coalitions, exchange programs, conferences, workshops, 40 hr. long training sessions, books, retreats, classes, liturgies, conventions (Diocesan and National), study groups, commissions, and resolutions. I know a lot about what has pointed out, but not ended this peace with oppression.

I came to the Episcopal Church because of racism, even though I may not have used that word for it then. In 1964, with a probably naïve awareness that there was “something” wrong about my mostly all white Ingraham H S, I applied for an inter-racial student exchange program with Garfield HS in Seattle. I was 16 yrs. old. In the course of that experience I participated in an Episcopal youth conference, walking into the Cathedral at sunset for Compline.

The other major experience was indicated by an obscene phone call and one piece of hate mail addressed to me, after I gave a short talk, based on my experiences at Garfield, for my all-white Presbyterian Church. I spoke out as a Christian against legal red-lining and in support of open housing. I had dared to suggest that different was simply different, not better, or worse.

So, Pentecost and George Floyd!

The Feast of Pentecost is a brilliant choice of days for this commemoration, it offers us such a **rich** collection of resources for our grievous problems.



The core of today is one Hebrew word for breath + wind + Spirit **RUACH**

The breath of life breathed by God into the dry bones of Israel, that these long dead bones might live again, and come together again as God's people, is paired with:

w/ the breath in the Psalm, breath no creature can live without

w/ the groaning too deep for words for when we have no words to pray,

w/ the Spirit that fell upon a vastly diverse gathering of the early Church (including Jews and Arabs)

w/ the Spirit sent to guide us into all the truth, taking what is of Jesus & declaring it to u

and with all of the lives lost and damaged by the constrictions of oppression & injustice, as marked this day by the anniversary of the death of Mr. George Floyd, who died because he could not breathe.

Thus two images give us much to hold on to.

the **Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost** on the gathered diverse community

and that **Valley of Dry Bones** being breathed into life,

As with the Dry Bones, our situation today, at times, feels impossible, like long dead, dry bones. After this many years of trying, and we do not seem to have made much progress.

But these images, rather than those of despair and hopelessness, are precisely the images we need in our hearts, minds...and "guts."

It is a challenge to do justice to both the new life-giving breath, wind of the Holy Spirit alongside of the anniversary of the death of George Floyd. I see that connection of Spirit and breath as stunning. Without breath, without the Spirit, we cannot live.

And, along-side of wave upon wave of division in our country and world, I see that VERY diverse group gathered together as one-in-the-Spirit, to be precisely what we need. For, we are not "gathered in the Spirit's tether" because we are alike, like each other, like the same things, and or agree in matters of theology, politics, or social theories of race.

Rather, we are drawn together in the Spirit's tether by Holy Strings of love manifest as respect, trust, and mutual responsibility that are fruits of the Spirit.

**We are drawn together at the level of breath:
and by a constellation of the reasons why Mr. George Floyd could not breathe.** **Holy Strings**

“Our desires”,
the ones we share
with all who breathe,...

are what bind us
together with
the Holy One,
Creation,
one another,
and ourselves.

It is in the fulfillment center
where our desires
are weighed,
and so variously responded to,
that we are pulled apart.

That we desire and long
for something, anything,
isn't the problem.
The problem
is whether or not
the desires are “ours”.

That is, *shared* with the Holy One,
Creation,
one another,
and ourselves,
and then allowed to
connect us.

The problem
is what comes of those longings
for the self alone,
apart from,
without any
of those holy strings
attached.

As to this Covenant to Root out Racism –

“Holy Strings” is my shorthand for how entering into a covenant could contribute to the changes needed for ending our peace with oppression and injustice.

However, in order for the covenant to be yet more than words without actions, we need to spend some time pondering **4 words - Breath, Lament, Repent, Covenant**

Breathing, lamenting, repenting, and covenanting are actions best understood in the first person. These words only “work” when they become familiar practices recognized in our experiences and felt within our bodies.

Within the biblical traditions...

Lament is a sound, a cry of distress, addressed to God

Repentance is a movement, a physical &/or spiritual change of direction or orientation, a turning

Covenant is a mutual arrangement, but not necessarily 50% + 50% of respect, trust, and mutual responsibility.

Lament is a sound, a cry of distress, linked to animal cries in Heb & the sound of a loon in English.

Addressed to God, out loud, usually in public, in the first person. (I or We)

It is the prayer of insiders and witnesses, rather than spectators in the safe seats.

Lament is an indication of faith, courage, & a willingness to risk... laments are not guaranteed to work, they dare to talk back to God

Lament also involves **humility** because it deals in volatile, strong emotions --
grief, fear, anger, rage, longing, lostness,

Outside of the Psalms of lament **Sometimes I feel like a motherless child**, is our best example of lament

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,

a long way from home,

a long way from home.

Lament may seem an unfamiliar term to us, but we actually do a lot of lamenting... but it is undercover, disguised as Country Western heart-break songs, screaming rock and roll, rap, the blues, jazz, sad movies, plays, and operas, communal mourning after a favorite team loses... that is, shows up in the arts, music, & sports.

The word is often used now to mean, “I regret”... something, much weaker than this intense first person (I or we)... cry out to you God in our distress.

And guilt is what repentance is for.

Repent As lament is sound, repentance is movement.

Repentance – *teshuva*, in Heb. means to turn, to change directions. Feeling sorry for something is not repentance until it leads to a change of direction.

Oppression and injustice are not confined to the edges of our personal worlds, they are deeply woven into all aspects of public life. We cannot repent for the things others have done, --- that we mourn, that we work against.

We can repent what we have done, left undone, not known, failed to notice, not cared about, not seen or heard, have ignored, or denied, by doing, noticing, caring, paying attention., and changing.

Guilt is about oneself, concern directed towards the self, not towards the those who are being harmed. For guilt to become constructive, bringing about major change or direction, it needs to keep growing and turn into compassion, escaping the confines of self-concern.

Covenant is the foundation of lament and the form of Holy Strings

A Covenant is an arrangement of mutual respect, trust, and responsibility, between two or more parties. Biblical covenants are not necessarily 50%-50% Parents have more power and more responsibilities than children do, but all have responsibilities and are worthy of respect.

Biblical notions of covenant have in mind matters of life and death, rather than house colors, or rules about boat trailers in the driveway, etc.

Both the oppressed and the oppressor are caught in oppressive systems. Without these Holy Strings of respect, trust, and responsibility that work against "over and undervaluing" of anyone, no one is liberated. "Over and undervaluing" is another way of describing oppression and injustice based on race, gender, ethnicity, ability, religion, national origin, age, social class culture, sexual orientation, or indigenous heritage... that bring about "unnecessary suffering caused by social inequality." (Nieto, 43)

A mutually shared covenant is how we are bound together in the Spirit to work against oppression. So, unless we have some experience of the Holy Strings between ourselves and Mr. George Floyd...*and the millions of people whose lives unfold as though there were no Holy Strings between us*, **nothing will change.**

We will have opportunities in the coming months to come back to this again...This is a very long- term project. We can only enter into such a Covenant a little bit at a time,...and with many ups and downs. Please... follow the excellent Anglican tradition of "read, mark and inwardly digest." Please keep these pages, and take them home and put them where you will see them again, e.g. on your refrigerator door.

Mark the things you wonder about, don't understand, don't recognize, find troubling, disagree with. Write your own version of it, translate it into your life, your words, your experience! But, don't stop there, keep going. Consider using a **Pondering Prayer**—

out loud, in writing on paper, in a computer, in your head,... while you walk around, sitting at the beach, in the garden,

Come, Holy Spirit come,
and breath into us courage, hope, and wisdom,
as we ask -- **Why, Holy One, why?**

Why are things this way? Why did George Floyd die?

Why am I upset? angry? sad? afraid? concerned? worried? longing? or not?

Why is/are she, he, they upset? angry? sad? afraid? concerned? worried? longing? or not?

Why, Holy One, why?

And then listen, and wait in hope. Give the Spirit time, a lot of time, to come upon you, to breathe into your heart and gut some new understanding, insight, compassion, wisdom... and see what comes.

Should you become discouraged in this process, as many people are, remember these two images the Spirit Breathing Life into what seemed impossible:

the Dry Bones ... & the Descent of Holy Spirit upon a diverse group
including Jews and Arabs, together in peace!

In that valley of the long dead, of the given-up hope ones, of despairing that God is with us still in this mess. we hear --

"From the four winds, come [Spirit] and blow into these slain ones that they may live."
...and. When the breath entered them, they came to life and stood on their feet, an extraordinarily large company."

May the Spirit breathe into us and counsel us to
restore and repair these many wounds of oppression and injustice. AMEN.

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*Beyond Inclusion, Beyond Empowerment: A Developmental Strategy to Liberate Everyone*, by Leticia Nieto with Margot F. Boyer, 2010, Cuetzpalin Publishing, Olympia, WA. This book is available by calling the *De Colores* Book Store in Olympia. (360) 357-9400, \$60.00 including shipping. The same price as Amazon.

