

The Voices of the Unheard

A Pentecost Sermon
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First Presbyterian Church
May 31, 2020

Text: Acts 2:1-21

“And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each” – Acts 2:6

On this Pentecost morning, I want you to listen again, to the opening words of our scripture:

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. “Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.”

In that precious moment, when the Spirit descended upon the disciples, everyone heard and understood each other. That is what we celebrate on Pentecost Sunday.

Only, this weekend we are discovering that we still don't hear each other, and we still don't understand each other. And when that happens, not only are human beings separated from each other, they are often forced in to conflict, conflict born of not hearing and not understanding. We are seeing that in our nation this weekend.

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said, *“Riots are socially destructive and self-defeating. ... But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard.”* Now I know that most of the protesters are not participating in any of the violence and destruction that we see on television. And I am aware that there are people who have joined the protests with the intent of creating violence and thus adding to the chaos of the moment. But still, we need to recognize that the protests, whether peaceful or destructive, are the voices of the unheard seeking to be heard. The question for us is, are we listening, and do we understand?

One morning, decades ago, I was driving to McCormick Seminary on Chicago's south side where I was a student working towards my ordination in the Presbyterian Church. That morning I had gotten tired of the delays on the expressway, so I got off and took the residential streets to campus. It was a diversion that I had taken several times before. While making a left turn off of 63rd street so I could head to campus, I was pulled over by a Chicago police officer. Now I've been stopped before for traffic violations, but this time felt different, because I was pretty sure I hadn't done anything wrong. Yet, all of a sudden, I felt very out of place: A young white man driving in a predominately black neighborhood, pulled over by a black police officer and not knowing why. I was nervous. No, I was more than nervous, I was scared. And maybe in that moment I caught a glimpse, if only a slight one, of what blacks, especially young black males, have to deal with on a daily basis in our country.

And it is real. Blacks in this country have to deal with a different reality than whites, especially when they interact with the police. My son taught me that. A few years ago, my son, Matt, was out with a group of friends in Chicago. One of their group had to go into a store, and the rest of them stayed outside to wait for her. The friend took a long time in the store, but it was a nice day and the rest of the group didn't mind the wait. However, someone apparently did mind, because a Chicago police officer came up to the group and asked them what they were doing there. The police officer confronted everyone in the group, except Matt. All the others in the group were black. The police officer was white. Somehow, the black men and women were a potential threat, the white young man, my son, was not.

We, who are white, don't often get to see moments like this, especially if we live in places like Westerville. But for blacks, this is not an isolated incident. It is a constant for blacks. It is part of the fabric of their lives. Parents of black children, especially black boys, have to have a talk with them about how to handle themselves in the presence of police. It is a talk that parents of white children don't have to have. I know that I didn't with my children. That is what this weekend is all about—when I get stopped by a police officer, I wonder what I did wrong and how much is the ticket going to cost me. When black man gets stopped by a police officer, he has to wonder if he will survive it—even if he cooperates fully. And it is based in reality. An black man is three times more likely to be killed by police than an white man. An unarmed young black man is 6 times more likely to be killed by police than an unarmed white man.

It would be easy to blame police officers for this problem, which would be another form of stereotyping. But beyond that, blaming someone else would let the rest of us off the hook. We haven't been listening and we haven't been listening because we don't want to hear. This problem is larger than a few incidents, it is larger than the police departments. It includes all of us. And we don't want to hear it.

It's not that we can't, we don't want to. When NFL football player Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the National Anthem a few years ago, he was criticized for his actions and eventually forced out of the league. What we don't remember is why he took a knee—it was to protest police brutality against blacks. We didn't listen, we criticized the man for pointing out injustice, rather than criticize the injustice itself.

Of course, there is more behind all this, lots more. There is the pandemic, which is disproportionately affecting blacks—with more blacks dying from the disease than whites. There is the economic disparity between whites and blacks, which doesn't seem to get any better. There is the health care disparity between the races, with blacks suffering from lack of health care at higher rates than whites. There is the rise in the white supremacy movement that in the last three years has found permission to promote racism in ways that widen the racial divide. The list goes on and on.

But maybe, on this Pentecost Sunday, we are hearing something that we didn't want to hear before, and we couldn't understand before: The voices of the unheard. And maybe we can begin the process of understanding. And that process begins with us, with recognizing and understanding our own racial biases.

My dad taught me that. My dad was a twin. He and his brother grew up together in a small southern Illinois town. They grew up with the same friends; they went to the same college; they pledged the same fraternity. And yet, when they got together, I would often hear them arguing through the night. They were arguing over race, and particular racial prejudices. My dad was the more open minded and my uncle was very racist. I always wondered what made my dad so different from my uncle. When I was a teenager, he told me a story. My dad went into the air force after graduating from college. He served as a navigator on fighter jets. One day, while on maneuvers over California, his plane's engine quit, and the pilot couldn't get it restarted. Finally, the pilot told my dad that they would have to eject, and they did—my dad's parachute carrying him to safety. There is a tradition in the air force, that if you have to use your parachute, you get a gift for the man who packed your chute—after all, that person saved your life. My dad bought a gift, and he went to the building where the chutes were packed. When he entered, he found the man who had packed his chute. It was an old black man, who, by the way, wouldn't accept my Dad's gift. He said, "Having the chute open properly was gift enough." My dad told me that after that, he couldn't be prejudiced against blacks anymore.

My dad told me something else. He said that we are all prejudiced. Even after his experience with his parachute packer, he said that he was still racist. He told me that we all carry ideas, stereotypes, and fears in our heads. We can't help it. But what we can do is not let them control us. I remember his words: "Our job is to work as hard as we can to be a little less prejudiced than we were the day before. And we can work to make our children even less prejudiced than we are."

Jesus gave us a command—that we love one another, just as he, Jesus, loved us. But I'm not sure we understand this command. Back in 1993, the nation erupted in riots over another racial incident involving the police. After the riots, the Chicago Tribune newspaper interviewed the writer Kurt Vonnegut who said, "*Society has become confused about race, thinking that what is required is that we should love blacks more. But that isn't the case at all. What we have to do is stop oppressing them. The problem is not the lack of love. Love costs nothing...We can actually hate blacks if we want, as long as they have a fair shot at the American dream.*"

Vonnegut is right in a way, we can talk about how we love blacks and everyone else, but that doesn't go far, certainly not as far as Jesus intended. "Love one another as I have loved you," he said. And justice was part of that love—a love that called out to the tax collector; a love that gave lepers a place at the table, a love that broke the rules and healed on the sabbath; a love that gave up his life for others.

Are we smart enough to figure out how to bring justice through love? I don't know if I'm smart enough to do that. I hope that together we are smart enough. What I do know that with the power of the Holy Spirit, the mighty winds of change can make justice happen—and give us the ability to hear.