

How Jesus Transforms: Jesus Conflagrates
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May 31, 2020

“This is Pentecost. Everything is different. Everything is new. Everything.” Those were the opening words of the video we invited you to watch before coming to this message. If you were watching the news this week you might legitimately wonder if those words are really true. Is this only theological marketing spin? Seriously... what is really new? A black man was murdered this week by a white police officer... again. And we grieved that we live in this kind of world. Again. And people protested injustice...again. And, then, sadly, over the past several days fires began to burn in some of our cities...again. Hasn't this all happened before?

Or maybe it's not THIS story... maybe it's something else in the news, something else in your own life... another kind of tragedy, another kind of conflict, another kind of grief. It all seems sometimes so exhaustingly familiar. Is ANYTHING different? Is ANYTHING new? Yes. Against all the hopelessness we may feel in moments like this, against much of the evidence of history, we who are in Christ shout forth a courageous YES! whenever we're asked those questions. We bank our lives on that Yes. We do what we are doing right now because of it... *“We are gathered here, in this place, in this time, to be something new... to refresh the old, to reboot the past, to be the Church God created us to be.”* The video said that... and so do we who are in Christ, this day especially. :) So, Yes!... we are ourselves the proof that there is something new in the world. Yes!... we are ourselves the evidence that God is up to something good. And, Yes!...we are ourselves the fruit of what He began on a day called Pentecost.

Today is Pentecost Sunday...the birthday of the church... the anniversary of that remarkable day when the Spirit of Christ descended upon a group of otherwise ordinary, powerless, and unnoticed people in a small city in the ancient world. They did not see themselves as world-changers. They did not aim to start a revolution. They were as distressed by what was happening in their world as we are in ours. And so they followed someone who said it could change, that it would change, that God was up to something and that they were invited into that something. They followed him... that Someone who not only preached it but lived it, who died and rose again to begin that change, that process of transforming everything.

Something new in the history of the world, something new in the relationship between God and humanity, began on that day... and 2000 years later we get to live out and offer that newness to our own generation. The earliest disciples were completely changed by their Pentecost experience... and, as we've said every Sunday since Easter... how the earliest disciples of Jesus were transformed then is how we are transformed now. If we are in Christ we, too, experience Pentecost. So let's read their story to see how Pentecost changes us today...

The story of Pentecost is found in ***Acts 2:1-8,14-18 (NLT)--On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And***

everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

At that time there were devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem. When they heard the loud noise, everyone came running, and they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers. They were completely amazed. “How can this be?” they exclaimed. “These people are all from Galilee, and yet we hear them speaking in our own native languages!...

Then Peter stepped forward with the eleven other apostles and shouted to the crowd, “Listen carefully, all of you, fellow Jews and residents of Jerusalem! Make no mistake about this. These people are not drunk, as some of you are assuming. Nine o’clock in the morning is much too early for that. No, what you see was predicted long ago by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days,’ God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on my servants—men and women alike—and they will prophesy.

WI said a few minutes ago that, as the earliest disciples of Jesus were transformed in the weeks after his resurrection, so are we. Nothing they had experienced in the seven weeks since his resurrection was as transformative as what happened on Pentecost. So, in order to understand how we are ourselves transformed, let’s let the story show us how they were transformed.

First, Pentecost brought to them a reversal of all of human history since the first humans sinned in the Garden. We have shown here at Hosanna us again and again what fragmentation sin unleashed on the world. Humanity was separated from God... so we began to exploit the created world and each other. The unity and intimacy of the man and woman was damaged, as men started treating women like property, or cattle... possessing them, possessing more than one at a time, controlling them, dominating them... with all the consequences we see to this very day. Other relationships were similarly damaged... a man killed his brother there, outside the Garden, and this week many of us saw a video of another man killing his brother, for God intended that we all be brothers and sisters for each other. People formed into tribes, and those tribes turned on each other, and tribes turned into nations, and those nations warred against each other. They found all sorts of reasons to exclude or exploit the other... different languages, different skin colors, different ways of doing things. And much of the world’s history is the sad, ongoing story of this fragmentation, separation, and division.

But even way back in the Garden God promised that one day he would reverse the separating pattern we had set in motion. That promise was repeated by the prophets of the old covenant, as they spoke for the God who shared our anguish that the world had become as it is, and pointed to the day when that promise would be fulfilled. But that reversal was a long time coming, so we also hear in those Scriptures the cries of people, particularly those on the hard receiving end of oppression and injustice... ***“How long, O Lord?”*** How long until your promise is fulfilled? In weeks like the one our country has experienced we echo those cries ourselves.

But take heart! Because we know good news! In the fullness of time, Jesus came and the whole thing started running backward!... like those old odometers if you drove in reverse, like clocks that tick counter-clockwise, like rivers that flow upstream in an earthquake. Jesus preached this gospel of reversal ...blessed are those whom you would never have considered blessed. The first shall be last, and the last first. And those who receive the kingdom are those you would least expect! Then he died and rose from the grave to set the process in motion. On the first Pentecost he sent his Spirit so we could participate also in that great reversal.

And so we see the first inklings of it happening that day and in the days to follow. There was to be no division, fragmentation, or separation in the people Christ was forming as his own body on earth. And so the Spirit was poured out that day, and in days afterwards, for all people, in equal measure, just like the prophet Joel had said... men and women, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free... no distinctions, no partiality, no second class members of the body of Christ. And what had been so long broken and fragmented began to be brought back together in the great reversal work of God through his church...a work that has continued to this day.

Sadly, for much of its history the Church has closed its eyes to this brokenness, or worse, justified it. We just can't do that anymore, can we? Just as we cry out to God, "how long, O Lord" so we might also hear him asking that same question of us: "How long, O church?... until you yourselves live in, live out, and live for the great reversal that I began at Pentecost?" How is God asking that of you this week, this day of Pentecost? How might you participate more fully in God's great work of reversal in the world, or just in your own life? What separation might you invite the Spirit to heal in your own life? What rules, barriers, or chains might the Spirit break in your own little corner of the world? How might your own life start flowing in reverse?

The 120 disciples gathered together on that Pentecost day were transformed by God's reversal of Sin's pattern of separation. The barriers of division Sin had erected were pulled down in the Spirit... and as Aslan says in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*... even death itself began to work backwards. This reversal frees us from the power of sin and death... but there is more.

Reversal leads to yet more transformation... which is interspersal... Yes, it was a new word for us, too! It's amazing how a preacher's vocabulary can increase when one more rhyming word is needed to finish the message. :) Interspersal means combining what is separate into a new whole... like when separate images and diagrams are interspersed throughout text to create one whole book. Every component of the book retains its uniqueness, yet joined together, one new whole is created. Or think of a mosaic! Each little piece is beautiful in itself but when they're all joined together, a new whole emerges. It's a beautiful way to describe the way the same Spirit was interspersed into each individual person at Pentecost... honoring their God-given uniqueness, yet uniting them all into one new whole... the Church!

And this one new whole was unlike anything that had ever existed before... In Genesis, before sin and death ever entered the picture, God and human beings co-existed but remained separate entities... we had bodies and God didn't...but at least there were no human-made barriers

between us. As we just described, our sin erected those barriers of division... between us and God... and between ourselves. But here's the good news!... God never erected any barriers toward us! God's love for us never changed. In fact, God chose to close the gap between us more fully than ever before. God chose to come to us... and become one of us. Divinity and humanity were united as one in Jesus.

And the union was not just for him... but for us, too! Jesus became like us... living and dying in a human body... and then being resurrected in a human body that had been transformed to live for eternity! Then, 40 days later, Jesus ascended in that same body... and when He did, He took us with Him into the Trinity... where we are now seated in Him in heavenly places.

But even that's not the end of it! That's the first part of our transformational union... we are in him. Ten days later, on the day of Pentecost, Jesus completed the union... His Spirit came to live within those first disciples... to unite them together with Him and each other as one. Now He was in them... and they were in Him... and what had been separate since the beginning of time was joined together into one new whole! No separation! And the same has been true for every one of us who has given our lives, ourselves, to him in love... He has given His life, Himself, to us in love...

So Pentecost is, in one sense, the completion of Christmas. What God did physically within one woman named Mary... He has done, and continues to do, spiritually within every one of us. The Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and Christ was conceived in and born through her... but on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit overshadowed everyone in that room... and Christ was conceived in them... and the Body of Christ, the Church, was born! And God is still conceiving new things in his people in this broken world, so that all things that are separate now will indeed one day be united together as one in him.

So, what difference does this make in your life? None... unless you let it... unless you recognize that your life is not your own... that the same Spirit that now lives in you also unites you to everyone else in whom the Spirit dwells... whether you like it or not... whether you like them or not. Pentecost transforms through reversing sin's divisions... so that each one of us can be joined together into one new whole in the Church. The Church was born that first Pentecost day... but every day is Pentecost when someone is "born again" through the Spirit... into Christ and into the Church... But like all newborns... this is still only the beginning... there is a lot of growing that yet needs to happen...

They did grow... but in a way that may seem counter-intuitive at first. The body of Christ grew through dispersal...spreading...which is the way viruses grow!... although this one is the best infection the world has ever seen. :) And, yes, this is the way fires grow too, isn't it?... which is perhaps why fire is a central element in the story of Pentecost. In the Greek, Acts 2:3 says not just that tongues of fire settled on each of them in the upper room, but that the fire that came to them was *dispersed* among the disciples...one source, with a flame on each of them... the spark to light a conflagration of the renewing, restoring, reconciling Spirit of Christ. Fire changes things.

It can burn away what needs to go and makes room for what needs to grow. It melts and molds, and spreads “like wildfire”...no wonder the work of the Spirit is symbolized by fire!

We see a second kind of dispersal on that day as well. The tongues of fire were accompanied by the tongues of languages... it's actually the same word used to describe both! It says that the disciples began to speak in different languages... which was exactly what happened in the story of the Tower of Babel...not too long after the sin that separated. Only this time instead of dividing people it brought them together by that Spirit that makes all things one. The disciples spoke loudly enough for all sorts of passersby to hear them speaking in their own languages! We'll talk more about this next week... but what's important for us to note today is that the good news of Pentecost was dispersed that day. It wasn't kept to those 120 people in the upper room. It wasn't a secret. God went out of his way to make sure that others knew... all sorts of different kinds of others!... so that they, too, could participate in the new thing he was doing. And not just all sorts of people in that city. Soon therefore, the good news of Pentecost was dispersed to other cities, other regions, other nations because the disciples themselves were dispersed, initially by persecution and later by choice. And so the gift of the indwelling Spirit, which started in one room in one city, was dispersed to many, many others...including, eventually, us!

That was possible because of the remarkable thing Jesus had done in his ascension. Jo Ann just noted this... that Jesus went so the Spirit would come... so we would be in him there and he would be in us here. The Spirit that came at Pentecost was HIS spirit... and the Spirit that those earliest disciples took with them was his spirit too... and the Spirit that dwells within us today is also his Spirit. And everywhere we go, we are the embodiment of his Spirit on the earth. We become the gospel of the new birth. That's what Jesus told the disciples before he ascended...literally, he said, **“As you go, make more disciples” (Matt. 28:19)**. How could they do that? Only Christ can make disciples, right? Yes! But his Spirit was doing through them what His Spirit did on Pentecost...when 3000 new disciples were made by the work of the Spirit.

Simply making new disciples and counting them is, of course, not the end goal of the kingdom. They needed to grow inward and upward as they grew outward... like all of us do. That's why the rest of the New Testament is there... to teach these dispersed disciples what it was to live the life of the Spirit in a mature way. That's why we've done this whole series... and why we're doing a second part to this message next week... because the dispersed Church of God must be a mature Church if the fire of the Spirit is going to be seen in us... and catch fire in the lives of others? How does the fire of the Spirit burn within YOU? And, particularly now, when our world is stressed and literally in flames, how is the Spirit living through you?

This transforming movement of God that is a reversal of the divisions that sin had caused... that was interspersal in bringing us together spiritually in full union with God and each other... and that has been spread through the world for centuries by the dispersal of those whose lives embodied the gospel... is now and will always be universal... our final point for this Day of Pentecost.

What was real in Jerusalem that day is real everywhere every day... in Lititz, Ephrata, and Manheim... in Minneapolis, Atlanta, and Washington... in the US, China, and Russia... Wherever

those who live by the Spirit are, the Spirit fully is. The Holy Spirit doesn't come in parts and pieces... a little bit poured out here... and little bit over there. The whole Spirit is given to the whole Church... in each and every local assembly... large or small... Jesus said **where even 2 or 3 are gathered as one in His name... He is there**. All of Him... because through His indwelling Spirit... nothing is missing.

Think of this perhaps as a fractal. In a fractal every part looks like the whole. As we've already said... the people, cultures, geography are all very different... and honored in their uniqueness. But all share the same Holy Spirit, in the same fullness, throughout the whole world, through all time. This is why Christians everywhere and always have said the Church is "universal." And this is why Paul said to the Ephesians... that although they lived geographically far distant... and culturally very different... from the disciples in Jerusalem or Rome or anywhere else... even so different that some were Jews and some were Gentiles... they shared **one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:4-6 NIV)**.

This means that we are connected... intimately, integrally... to all others in whom the Spirit dwells... whether we've ever met them personally or not... whether they are alive in this world or the next. In the kingdom of God, we are one... universally. We may not be in the same room for this message... even though we'd love to be!... but we are still joined as one. We may not suffer in the same ways that some of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world have, and are... but we are still joined as one. We may not speak the same language or live in the same country or see the world through the same eyes... but we are still one through the same universal Holy Spirit that is within us... and is at work in the whole world... drawing everyone toward Jesus... reconciling and restoring all things as one in Christ.

And the fact that the Spirit came on the feast of Pentecost was itself a sign that all are included. Pentecost was the Spring harvest festival... when they would offer stalks of their grain to God... two kinds of grain, wheat and barley.... Just as in their world, there were two kinds of people, Jews and Gentiles. Pentecost included both harvests... So, the Spirit came to a group of 120 Jews in Jerusalem one morning to reap a first harvest... but not long after, the Spirit came for the second harvest in the same way... to a group of Gentiles in the city of Caesarea, in the house of Cornelius. Christ made one whole new humanity from the two... Pentecost was and is, then and now, for everyone everywhere...

So the Bible admonishes us to **make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace**. In a week in which the world has seen dramatic proof of our differences, in a year in which we have felt our separation and isolation more keenly than ever before, how can you and I keep the unity of the Spirit? We live in a consumerist culture... most people do pretty much everything, including faith, because they think it's good for them... not because it's something to give to the world. Living in the Spirit will really confront that kind of narcissism, won't it? It'll make us look out for the interests of others in ways we haven't risked before. It'll cause us to make

peace when we otherwise would not have even tried. It is the Spirit's work, but it is ours as well...ours to live and ours to enjoy when we actually experience it in real life.

This is Pentecost. This is the birthday of the church. This is a day when we remember when and how Christ started a holy conflagration, and a day in which we want our souls to be aflame with his Spirit in us. No matter what's in the news, no matter how powerless we feel, no matter the remaining brokenness of our own souls, this is a day we declare what is nonetheless true...what has been true since that first Pentecost... *Everything is different. Everything is new. Everything.* Including us. Do we dare to live like that is true? :) We'll take up that question next week, to discover some practical ways to live as Pentecost people in a burning world.

Blessing for Pentecost // Joyce Rupp

*May the enthusiasm of the Spirit leap incessantly within you
and help you to live a vibrant life.*

*May the warmth of the Spirit's fire be extended through your concerns and care
for all those who need your love.*

*May the blaze of Spirit courage enable you to speak the truth
and to stand up for respect, dignity and justice.*

*May the undying embers of the Spirit's faithfulness support you
when you feel spiritually dry and empty.*

May you be mindful of the Eternal Flame within you.

*May you rely on this Source of Love
to be your constant ally and steady guide.*

May this, and so much more, be so... this day... and always...