

PENTECOST, YEAR B, MAY 19, 2024

Did you know that the oboe is one of the hardest instruments to play? It's because it is a double reed instrument that requires a very precise mouth position. And what makes it also hard is that the air that is being blown through the instrument via the reed needs to be constant and at the same pressure, otherwise, things get thrown off. In school orchestras the oboes often sound out of tune because it requires having a good reed and learning to control the air and mouth together to play in tune together.

Professional oboists make their own reeds which is an intense process. They purchase the cane, soak it in warm water, split it, shape it, dry it, wrap it in nylon coated with bees wax and then scrape it which is the most important part to get the right sound. Now today the standard practice in most professional orchestras is for the oboe to be the instrument to which all the other instruments tune too because of its unique timbre and range and the non-existence of tuning slides on the oboe.

I'm sure you're wondering why all this talk about the oboe when today is the feast of Pentecost. More about the oboe later.

It is indeed Pentecost – the feast we often refer to as the Birthday of the Church. In many respects it does signal the birth of what would eventually be called the church but really Pentecost is the birth of a revolution. It's a revolution of the Spirit. As Professor Judy Fentress-Williams of Virginia Seminary said, "The gift of the Holy Spirit is God's ongoing presence and power. And the book of Acts offers an account of how the Spirit empowers and supports this newly birthed revolutionary movement."

As Bishop Curry stated, " It's a revolution of love, a love revolution of compassion, goodness, justice and right, human decency and kindness. Pentecost is about the birth of that revolution, to transform this world and creation from the nightmare it often is into the dream that God has intended."

The church has, most of the time, failed abysmally at this revolution. Many churches, after reading the lessons for the day, say, "Here what the spirit is saying to the church or God's people." I don't think we've paid much attention to the true spirit of God and what she calls us to do. If we had we wouldn't have engaged in so many egregious wars like the crusades and Catholic/Protestant wars that ripped apart much of Europe and Ireland. We wouldn't have used the Bible to support slavery, subjugation of women, condemnation of gays and alienation of anyone who didn't agree with our brand of Christianity.

We're great at closing the doors God means to leave open. God is always and forever drawing the circle wider than we like and it is hard for us to take because if we really listened to the spirit it feels threatening and scary. "We should be asking the spirit to cast out our selfishness, self-centeredness, egocentricity, power politics, greed, indifference, injustice, bigotry, prejudice and ask the true spirit of the God of love, compassion inclusivity, grace and justice to be born anew in us."

On that first Pentecost when the disciples received the gift of the Spirit they didn't stay huddled in the room. They went out into the streets and communicated with the people. We like to say the miracle of Pentecost was all the different languages that were spoken and heard but really it's about the disciples interacting with the people and talking to them, not only about Jesus' love for them but about their concerns and needs. What evolved from those interactions was a group of people who became a new family.

No longer was it just their self interest that was important but the needs of the whole community. As Paul famously said, "There is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male nor female; there is no longer Jew or Gentile." They became more than they could have ever become on their own. They became God's beloved community, the human family of God.

Paul also said in Romans, "that the whole creation yearns and groans that all of God's children might become God's human family." Well, how do you think we are doing on that front? Not so good because we have become so insular, so concerned with our own survival, self-preservation of our churches and the way we've always done things, our way of life, our brand of religion or politics that we forget that the first and foremost way to be a community of God's human family is to practice the one principal Jesus calls us to do and be. And it is found in First John where the writer writes, "Beloved, let us love one another. Because love is of God; and those who love are born of God and know God. Those who do not love, do not know God. Why is love so important? As Bishop Curry said, "Because love is ecumenical; it's interfaith; it's bipartisan. Love is multiethnic. Love embraces and includes us all. Because the source and the origin of love is not any of us. The source and the origin of love is God. And when we live in love, we live in God.

How do we do that? There's a story that was told in the documentary "God's House" about a small community of Muslims in Albania during World War II. As Nazi armies advanced toward the small country of Albania, messages were sent by couriers to the Albanian foreign ministry. "You are to identify all Jews living in Albania, provide their addresses, and any contact information." It so happened that the foreign minister of Albania was a Muslim. And in the spirit of his faith, he organized a kind of underground railroad. And he sent out word to the small Muslim community that said, "The Jewish people are to be your people. They must live in your homes. They must sleep in your beds. They must eat at your tables. You are to treat them as members of your own family, for that is who they are." And the Muslim community of Albania saved two thousand Jews from the Holocaust.

This is how the beloved community is supposed to act. This is how a revolution of love begins. When we put the concerns of others before our own. When we see each other as brothers and sisters no matter what race, color, or religion we are. It's when we stop worrying about what's going on inside our walls and start concerning ourselves with our neighbors outside these doors. God is saying that God's Church, from its very inception, needs to honor the boundless variety and creativity of all human voices. We are to embrace our diversity because God demands it of us.

Back to the oboe. When my daughter was in grammar school she ended up playing the oboe because she was the only one that could make a sound from it. In fifth grade, the two grammar school bands in our town came together for a concert. The other grammar school had only one oboe player too. So all through middle school and high school these two oboists sat next to each other trying to stay in tune with each other. As my daughter was planning for her wedding this past fall, she wrote, How to you get two oboes in tune? They get married. The oboe player she met in fifth grade is now her husband. But, again, what has this got to do with Pentecost.

Remember I said the oboe is hard to play because the air that is being blown through the instrument needs to be constant and at the same pressure, otherwise,

things get thrown off. This is true about the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is constantly being blown in our direction at a continuous pressure for us to embrace but we have not always been very receptive of it and so the spirit gets thrown off. But the spirit is persistent and just like the oboist that takes great pains in making, shaping and scraping their reeds to get the right sound, the spirit is relentless in shaping us into who God calls us to be. There is a lot of scraping that needs to take place to rid us of those ideas and concepts that are not consistent with God's call of love.

Just as an orchestra is diverse with all its many types of instruments that gets tuned to one instrument so we are a diverse group of people with many different languages, ethnicities, ways of worship that are being brought together by the one all-encompassing spirit. The spirit asks us to tune ourselves to hear God's call to love. In some respects it's like a marriage. We are being called together into a relationship with each other that sometimes is out of tune so it requires care and compromise that changes as we adjust to the various sounds it produces.

You know the Hebrew word for spirit is ruah which is also feminine. It's a guttural sounding word that when you say it the pronunciation is on the second syllable which produces an explosion of air. Each one of us is filled with the Spirit just waiting to be expelled from us into the world.

The church is still, and forever, trying to keep up with the Holy Spirit. And maybe that will always be the case. And God understands that. That's why God through the Spirit keeps stretching us in the direction of compassion and love. We just need to step up to the challenge. So, do you hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people." Better yet, do you dare to hear what the Spirit is saying? May ruahhhh fill your heart and soul and may she be relentless in pushing us out our doors to love bigger and better as God call us to do. Amen.