
Let Them Know Who You Are!

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Day of Pentecost – Year A**

[unedited transcript:]

Wow. What a party. Everybody was there. Everybody who was anybody had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the day of Pentecost. The day on which they commemorated the giving of the law at Mount Sinai.

The disciples were there, all of them, the whole gathered community. Though, perhaps not as excited about the party as everyone else. Jesus was gone. They were left to wait. They didn't know when or how he would return. So they prayed and they waited.

And then suddenly at an hour in the morning that was too early for anything really to happen, a sound of rushing wind filled the room and tongues of fire rested on the head of each disciple. They began to speak, filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in languages that they did not know they knew and others began to hear them. They were shocked to hear their own language coming from these Galileans, who were notoriously bad at foreign languages apparently.

But what happened was a further gathering of the community. What happened was new life. You know how language is, those words that we use to mark ourselves from others. The words that only the people in our group actually understand the nuances and valences of. That's what was bridged, all of the bonding of each of those individual groups was bridged by the story that the disciples were telling.

And as everyone heard what they did not expect to hear, Peter found the words and the courage to step up and remind them of why they were there. Peter reminded them of what the presence of God looks like and feels like and that the Messiah that had been prophesied was in fact Christ. And as they were reminded why they were there, then what they were doing seemed much less important. As the barriers that separated them were bridged by a common story, it all felt different.

3000 were baptized on that day we are told and they went on to follow the apostles' teaching and prayers. 3000 people. Wow, that was a party. Some say it was the birthday of the church. I say it was church.

In fact, I heard another story recently that had a similar pattern to it. This story occurs in 2017 on the mall in Washington, D.C. A man by the name of Hawk Newsome gathered the Black Lives Matter protesters from New York on the national mall. They were there to confront a group of Trump protestors who had organized, what they claimed would be the mother of all rallies.

Now, Newsome wasn't new to this kind of gathering. He had been in Charlottesville only weeks before. In fact, he had been injured there, hit in the face with a rock. So he was ready. He was, in his own words, ready to fight.

And then, as the two groups faced off against each other, as the insults escalated, and the tensions became almost too much to bear, something very unusual happened. A man by the name of Tommy Hodges, a white man who had organized the pro Trump rally invited Newsome to take the main stage. Newsome was shocked.

Hodges said, "I'm going to give you two minutes to put out your message. I'm going to give you our platform so that you can say what you want to say. It's not because I agree with your message. It's because you have one. And if you have one, you have a right to tell it. It's the fact that you have the right to tell your story," Hodges

said.

So, Newsome took the microphone. You can imagine how confused he must have felt. Not unlike perhaps hearing the sound of rushing wind and wondering where the tongues of flame were that were going to give him the words to speak.

But as he stopped and prayed, he remembered a moment in Charlottesville. He said that he was stooping down to pick up a rock. He had had it. He was about to fight. And there was, in his words, a little old white lady who said to him, "Your mouth is your most powerful weapon. You don't need anything but that."

A committed Christian, Newsome heard this voice and lived in to what this voice was telling him. And he stepped upon the stage. He heard another voice emerge out of his heart, telling him simply, "Let them know who you are. Let them know who you are."

Newsome stood there before the hostile crowd. And he started speaking. "My name is Hawk Newsome." He said, "I am president of Black Lives Matter in New York. And I am an American. And the beauty of America," he continued, "Is that when you see something broken in your country, you can mobilize to fix it." To his surprise, the crowd erupted in applause.

"So you ask," he said. "Why is there a Black Lives Matter movement? Because you can watch a black man die and be choked to death on television. And nothing happens. We need to address that."

"That was a criminal," somebody yelled. And the crowd started to boo. "We're not anti-cop," Newsome pressed on. "Yes, you are," somebody yelled back. "We're anti bad cop," Newsome countered. "We say a cop is bad, then he needs to be fired like a bad plumber or a bad lawyer. Or," and he paused, "A bad politician."

The crowd cheered, these were words they understood. This was a story they recognized. "I said that I'm an American," Newsome continued. "I'm also a Christian. We don't want handouts. We don't want anything that is yours. We want our God given right to freedom, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." The crowd, again, erupted in applause and cheers. Then someone shouted, "All lives matter."

"You're right, brother. You're so right," Newsome continued. "All lives matter. But when a black life is lost, we get no justice. That's why we say black lives matter." Then Newsome continued, his time almost over. "Listen, I want to leave you with this and then I'm gone. If we really want to make America great, we're going to have to do it together."

A lady near the stage reached up and handed Newsome an American flag and he held it and waved it before the crowd. Chants erupted, "USA, USA, USA." And as he stepped off the stage Newsome was engulfed, embraced by the movements' supporters. All of the Trump supporters that were standing near the stage came up to congratulate him.

Newsome happened to be wearing a bloody bandana over one hand. He had cut that hand earlier in the day, opening boxes in preparation for the parade. The leader of a biking gang looked at his hand and said, "Can I tend that for you?" And then as he unwrapped the bandana and began to take care of Newsome's hand, he said, "You know, I thought I understood you, but now I get it. You're all right, brother." And they slapped hands and parted ways.

And then another man, Kenny Johnson, who was a leader of a biking group, Bikers for Trump, came to Newsome and asked him if he would meet Johnson's son. "It would be an honor," Johnson said, "If I could introduce you to my son," his young son, Jacob. Newsome went over and then Johnson asked him if he would hold Jacob in his arms so that Johnson could take a picture of them.

It's not hard for me to see the Pentecost moment there, the loud rush of wind and the tongues of flame that gave voice, that could be heard by another group. Newsome found the words, as did Hodges, who invited him to transcend those bonded groups, to bridge everyone that was there, to tell a larger story that included all of them, a larger story. And when they had to work together to each get what they wanted and everybody understood.

And there was a feeling of fellowship and brotherhood that transcended, included and transcended I might add. It's not that the differences went away, it was that there was a respect for the dignity of the other. They were reminded if you will, why they were all there. And so that what they were doing while they were there became less important.

I've had a chance to go over to the cathedral this week. I tend to go over and walk the grounds and make sure things are the way they're supposed to be. At least that's the excuse I use to get back to the place that I love. I crossed Peachtree near the Horseshoe Drive and as I was standing there, I was recalling the great Easter vigil, our fire that starts, in my calendar, the new year.

Maybe you've been to that vigil, that early morning service, where we start with this massive fire and light the paschal candle, the sign of new life. And then each of us has smaller lights, tongues of flame, perhaps. And we process into the nave.

And as I was recalling that memory, I then had one of those montage sequences, like Facebook was posting everything I might want to remember. And I walked over to our parking lot where I could envision the farmer's market. And I walked by the doors of Child Hall where I can envision all of the buses pulling up for the homeless Requiem. And I could look over and see the labyrinth where I remember the children playing, ironically, all over the porch, where the insides rooms were being used for centering prayer.

And then as I walked around the building, I came to the point, thankful for parishioners who've been gracious enough to donate the shrubbery and pavers that made that a beautiful walk and I've remembered the Dean standing there a long time ago, it now seems. Starting what we have called this season of social distancing for the common good. Standing outside to remind us that we are still in spiritual communion, even though we can't gather in our space.

Then I came back around to the Horseshoe Drive and there, as I stood there and I could imagine the Peachtree Road Race, which won't happen this year on July 4th, but it's another party, isn't it? It felt to me like we process in with our new fire, into the nave to remember who we are, why we are there.

And then we come back out and we stand on the street, blessing, all who come by. And that is who we are. We are blessed in order to be a blessing. That is our story. That is the language that we speak, that everyone of any group can hear. It is the story that bridges the differences of bonded groups.

It is a message which is intuitively available. If we stop, learn how to listen for the voice of God and then start again and learn how to act as God's children. Our story is a Pentecost moment. Our story is a voice of Christ within us, each individually, and larger as a group, calling us forth to recognize the dignity of every human being.

To always remember that why we are gathered is more important than what we may be doing there and calling us forward to include, but transcend, all that is happening. This is love. This is spiritual communion. This is our story. And when you do it right, it's often a great party.

So, celebrate this day of Pentecost. This party of the church. It may be the birthday of the church, but it is church at its core. That's our story and I'm sticking to it.

Amen.