

Sermon for Trinity Sunday – Outdoor Eucharist
June 7, 2020 (First Sunday worshipping in-person since March 15, 2020)
The Rev. Kerith Harding

It has been 12 weeks since we gathered here in person;
12 of the most significant and eye-opening and transformative weeks
that we perhaps will ever see in our lifetimes.
And it isn't over.

No doubt a mix of feelings roils within us this morning:

*Relief that we are gathered again, but a wariness about the setting, the face masks, the new awkwardness around hugging.

*A joy that we are opening back up, but a worry we will move too quickly.

*A gratitude that we live on a relatively peaceful piece of land in the middle of the ocean, and a deep concern about events on the mainland.

*The holy desire to join the movement and stand with our black neighbors, and an even holier call to examine our own hearts, to set aside our inherited blinders, to interrogate ourselves in a fashion that is profoundly uncomfortable and yet desperately necessary.

We are all, like the blind man in the Gospel of John, standing before a Lord who asks what we want. And in this moment in our nation's history, the blind man's words must become our own: *Lord, I want to see.*

Seeing what is right in front of us can be surprisingly, frustratingly difficult. Author Michelle Alexander studied mass incarceration of black men and how it produces a black underclass and she said this: "Only after years of working on criminal justice reform did my own focus finally shift, and then the rigid caste system slowly came into view. Eventually it became obvious. Now it seems odd that I could not see it before."

What Alexander is describing is conversion: literal *metanoia*, a change in the way we see that teaches us that the way we saw before was not full, not complete. It isn't just a *different* perspective, it is a *truer* one, and therefore a *better* one. The right one, the just one. One that prohibits us from returning to our old perspectives. One that tells us that the old one, simply put, was wrong.

And when this conversion occurs we can be sure that the Holy Spirit is present, on the loose, tearing down blinders and opening eyes.

It is fitting that we are gathered here in this moment on Trinity Sunday, in the season of Pentecost. While the coronavirus has spent the last three months taking over a hundred thousand American lives, it has also exposed our common vulnerabilities as human beings, our need for touch and friendship, it has fostered in us a new awareness of our need for each other, for the interlocking safety net of a community. It also took away all professional sports and concerts and campaign events, so literally, there was nothing to watch on tv but more of the same news about Covid-19 and unemployment. Lockdowns eased, but we remained a restless people, on edge.

And then George Floyd was murdered, and it was all on video. And our focus shifted.

And finally, there were no news stories to replace those images, and we began to see anew what has been right before our eyes.

This is the season of the work of the Spirit.

Just last week the Holy Spirit's descent on the apostles was described like this: *“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.”*

The season of Pentecost celebrates this Spirit, this great transformer of the hearts of men and women, this force unseen, that gives us courage where we had little, and sight where we were blind. The Spirit is disruptive, courageous, not orderly, and not predictable. And she is a force.

In fact, evidence of the Spirit is so abundant these days that one theologian remarked, “It seems to me that the Holy Spirit has canonized George Floyd.”

How else can we explain, she seemed to be saying, “this rush of violent wind” tearing across the country, summoning people from their comfortable lives, from their desks and their couches, to stand with a black community that has simply borne way too much anguish? How else can we explain the video clips of wanton police brutality against unarmed, kneeling protesters, forcing all of us to see what we simply had not seen before even though it happened so much? How else can we explain the searing impact of videos of black men in tears, some of them celebrities, describing how anxious they are when they go for a jog or go for a walk, when they shop at a convenience store, while they go bird-watching, and whenever they are pulled over?

How else can we explain — to give a small example — NFL quarterback Drew Brees’ very public conversion? Just a few days ago he offered a passionate defense of the American flag, and he argued that no one should ever kneel in protest before it. He was referring to the controversy around this very gesture, which Colin Kaepernick and other NFL players made to protest police brutality against black people. And then Drew Brees got a lot of phone calls — many from his black teammates on the New Orleans saints — and he had an open enough mind and heart to realize he had, as he put it just a day later, “completely missed the mark on the issues we are now facing as a country.” He added that his comments “lacked awareness, and any type of compassion or empathy.” He saw what he hadn’t seen before, and he realized he had been wrong, and is now closer to the truth. How else can we explain this, than the work of the Spirit?

Even the NFL issued a statement that said: “We, the National Football League, admit we were wrong for not listening to NFL players earlier and encourage all players to speak out and peacefully protest. We, the National Football League, believe that black lives matter.” How else can we explain such an about face, such a public acknowledgment that they had failed to see what was right in front of them?

And how many of us who were utterly outraged that peaceful protesters were tear gassed in order for the President to stand in front of an Episcopal church in DC waving a bible, found ourselves uncomfortable later because a question had wormed its way into our minds, asking us: am I more outraged over that stunt than I was at the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery? How else can we explain these moments of awareness and brutal honesty than that this is the Holy Spirit’s hour, this *truly is* the season of Pentecost?

This moment calls us to an examination of unjust laws, of unjust police practices, of brutality and harassment. And it calls us to an examination of our very selves. It calls us to ask the Spirit to let us join her in her work, to see what we do not yet see, to have a language we do not yet have, to have a courage that is best described as a holy courage.

It is good to be here again, my friends, where nothing looks as it once did. During these past twelve weeks, many of us believed we would all be best off if we agreed we wouldn't merely wait out the coronavirus and return to normal. Well, normal is no longer available to us. Normal allowed us to be blind. We are in new territory now, not of our own making. And as we pray for economic recovery and health and peace, we must pray for black brothers and sisters, we must ask them for forgiveness, and we must continue to pray the prayer of the blind man: *Lord, I want to see.*

Amen.