

May 31, 2020  
Pentecost Day (A)  
United, Oak Park

## **A Time to Forgive**

The scene near the beginning of the book of Acts—where 120 of Jesus’ earliest disciples are all gathered together in one place in Jerusalem—is probably what usually comes to mind for us on the day of Pentecost. That was a dramatic event, when the spirit entered their presence with the force of a great wind and tongues of fire appeared over everyone and they began to speak in various languages.

Over the years, many congregations have attempted to re-enact that event on Pentecost Day, with several people speaking parts of the reading or the intercessory prayers in different languages. Still others of us might be familiar with the practice of speaking in tongues in Pentecostal churches. If you have ever witnessed such an event, it was probably quite moving and memorable.

Our gospel reading for this Pentecost Day, from John’s account of what took place on the day of Jesus’ resurrection, might seem a bit dull by comparison, but it’s no less significant of a teaching from the

church's scriptures. We heard that Jesus breathed the gift of the Holy Spirit onto his disciples so they might continue in the work that he had started. Moreover, Jesus also commissioned the disciples to forgive sins. Certainly Jesus considered the practice of forgiveness with utmost importance if it was so closely linked to the sending of the spirit for the disciples to continue in his mission.

While we may not usually have emphasized our work of forgiving one another as the primary story on this festival of Pentecost, it does seem especially timely this year. Don't we all feel weighed down these days by our failures to act or to do the right thing?

One of my pastoral colleagues has become fond of asking for others' forgiveness in the last several weeks because—as she says—she has never led a congregation during a global pandemic before. Nearly three months ago when congregations around the world were faced with needing to cancel services and curtail most other activities as well, lots of decisions had to happen rather quickly, and without extended group deliberations. So my colleague has frequently asked forgiveness from

the people she has been called to serve. We all could be doing similar things in our own varied settings.

As with nearly everyone else, most of us probably never anticipated the kinds of situations we have been thrust into recently. Never before have we had to consider how dangerous it could be for us simply to greet a neighbor or to leave the house to buy groceries. With the changing protocols around wearing masks or not, or whether to wipe down every delivery that comes into the house, we have had much to learn. In the process we have all likely put ourselves and others who are close to us at some greater risk of being infected from the coronavirus. We have probably all been too lax at some times and too unyielding at other times.

If we live in a household with other people, it's likely that our extreme togetherness for the past two and half months has caused greater frustrations and anxieties within our own families. We are getting on each other's nerves even more than usual. Very likely we all need one another's *forgiveness* in some way.

My own challenges in dealing with the pandemic were heightened during recent trips to Iowa to be with my father during his final days of life and then to attend a funeral home visitation and a graveside service. Just crossing the Mississippi River into Iowa reminded me how divided we have become in this country about so many issues. Iowa is at a somewhat different stage of reopening than we are here in Illinois. People there are generally not wearing masks as much as we are around here and do not appear to be as concerned about keeping six-foot distances between one another. I felt very uncomfortable because how I behave these days as a resident of Oak Park made me decidedly out of step in a small town in Iowa; even though it's a place where I used to ride my bike with friends and delivered newspapers to many houses.

So at my father's recent funeral some of us wore masks and tried to maintain physical distancing, while others did not do these things. I had to keep reminding myself to be deferential about my own need to wear a mask and to keep several feet away from relatives and friends that I hadn't seen in years, even while they didn't always share the same attitudes that I did. It seemed rather awkward for all of us, and

during one of life's occasions when none of us feel particularly comfortable anyway.

Right now we probably all need to give one another greater latitude and to allow for greater margins of error, because none of us have ever lived through a global pandemic like this one, just as my colleague has confessed.

Unfortunately, quite a number of people have let political party affiliations and cultural wars get in the way of making sensible decisions about public health and safety. And we have buttressed the way that we feel about current affairs with pundits from our own comfortable social media feeds that we often draw upon whenever we get into heated arguments with someone else.

We may need to confess being too quick to judge others. We all need some space, and yet the volume on our disagreements only seems to be getting louder.

Consider how tensions erupted this past week in Minneapolis, and in other cities across the country, in reaction to a scene that is

unfortunately all too familiar. Another policeman crossed the line in protecting the community when he needlessly and tragically caused someone else's death. George Floyd's death was an echo of Eric Garner yelling that he couldn't breathe in the New York borough of Staten Island six years ago when a vicious response by police did not fit the pettiness of the alleged crime.

Though scenes of protest on the last several evenings are indeed troubling, it's also become evident that protests calling out entrenched racism within police force ranks initially started out to be peaceful events, while more extremist groups have taken advantage of the moment to provide cover for fomenting violence in support of their more radical and racist ideologies.

Last Monday's incident has reminded me that while I have occasionally called upon the police to help me in a number of situations over the course of my life, I might have an entirely different viewpoint if I were an African American man. I have never felt as if I were the victim of racial profiling. I have never felt as if my life were in danger

because I was pulled over for a minor traffic infraction. Unfortunately, people of color can't say the same thing.

And certainly I must confess that I haven't done all that I could do to make society more equal for everyone, regardless of race, or color, or national origin. I haven't always spoken up whenever I have witnessed racial inequality and discrimination. Particularly in *this* moment when because of public health risks, intense political divisions, severe unemployment, and greater disparities than ever between race and class, we might all be able to confess our lack of not doing whatever we might have been able to do. We need forgiveness. We also need to forgive others. We need to see one another as whole persons and not as caricatures to be demonized.

As Jesus gave the gift of the Holy Spirit to his disciples—and expected that they would forgive one another's sins—we *desperately* need that revival of the Holy Spirit's work in *our lives* today.