

Moving Us Out of the Comfort Zone

A Pentecost Sunday Reflection, June 5th, 2022

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+ Peace be with you!

Today is Pentecost Sunday! The Christian community worldwide celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit to empower Jesus' first disciples and followers to leave the cocoon and share God's message of hope. This was a momentous step for the community to experience the power of God's love to face the world outside. The world has changed because of the disciples' missions and faithful witnesses.

It is our prayer that the Holy Spirit also comes to fire us up for missions! May we also leave our cocoon and be ready to meet a different world under the lingering threat of the pandemic, inflation, war, gun violence, and much more. Our world has an urgent need for transformation, from greed to justice.

I would like to comment on the unpredictable nature of life and also of ministry. When the Spirit moves God's people out to serve the world, it is not always met with joy and excitement; often, people are perplexed with many unanswered questions. Jesus' followers in the first century may have experienced the risen Christ. But they needed the Holy Spirit to push them out into the world and not be afraid. Think about it, it is not as simple and easy as it seems. The world is complex, full of horror and violence. So we build our lives in ways that made us comfortable. In most ways, predictable, so that we have some sense of control. It is natural to want to be in the comfort zone. As much as we celebrate it so widely in the public arena, the idea of learning something new is always potentially unsettling since it may challenge our former ways of knowing. Then we are put in an uncomfortable situation.

The coming of the Holy Spirit isn't just making us into a vibrant community of faith, it also pushes us to not be afraid of others, other languages, other people who speak other languages, other people who speak like us, and live like us. The Holy Spirit is not afraid of diversity and difference.

But then, the world where you and I are part of, has developed systems that distinguish between 'them' and 'us.' We must admit, racism even subtle prejudice attitudes, has somehow settled in our minds and hearts. Often, we welcome neat theological ideas about welcoming others, but it goes nowhere except in our heads. The Holy Spirit upsets our neat ideas and pushes us out to meet people and to experience them. This is not a case for mission, but a case for self-transformation and self-critique. The Bible is full of stories where God challenges God's people to change their ways of thinking and behaving. The Day of Pentecost is a time for the community of faith to move out of their comfort zone and to meet their neighbours next door.

We are in 2022. We think formerly the colonial world of inequality and oppression are things of the past, but this is not the case. Humanity tends to show favoritism to some and ignores the others. Racism, discrimination, antisemitism, and stereo-profiling are on the rise, not decreasing. We may be lucky to live in this part of the world and live mostly as middle-class folks. This isn't a universal picture for many countries and people's groups. It is a disheartening thing to see how some political leaders neglect their duties but take the opportunity to abuse their power. Racism isn't just a problem out there, but also within the church. And that is why the United Church of Canada these days is fully committed and is in full speed to educate all of us to examine our lives, beliefs, and attitudes.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, we learn not to lose hope but to dive into uncharted territories. Finding new ways to be church is no longer a slogan, but a necessity!

In the Bible, the Holy Spirit has many names and characteristics; one of them is the Comforter. The idea that the Holy Spirit is the Comforter seems to suggest that God comes to ease our distress, encourages us, and liberates us in times of trouble. We certainly have experiences of that. But when we read closely in the New Testament, the Spirit didn't comfort anyone; on the contrary, the Holy Spirit continues to push people out of a comfort zone, and it really makes things more complicated. More than ever, in order to be a relevant force of hope in the world, the Christian church needs to be uncomfortable, and entering uncharted territories.

The Holy Spirit can still be called a Comforter, as it is a constant reminder that we are not orphans. We have a companion in life, a story to tell, and a way of life to show. We often mess up. But the Holy Spirit will not give us up. The Christian communities face all sorts of challenges and difficulties. May we be inspired to know that despite our shortcomings, we are still God's messengers of peace, hope, and courage in the troubling world. Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Let's pray:

Loving Creator, this is a trying time for many of us. We ask that you give us patience, trusting better days are waiting upon us. May the Holy Spirit continue to speak to us, and comfort us not to lose hope. Enable us to see what opportunity you have given us to be your messengers of love, even in troubling times. Amen.