

# “Flames of Pentecost, Flames of Protest”

A Sermon by Eric J. Harvey, Ph.D.

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**W**hat a week to be the guest preacher! It seems like every day has brought enough news for ten sermons. In the past few weeks, on top of a global pandemic we as a nation have had to confront the tragic deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, and to watch the less tragic but still disturbing video of Michael Cooper.

So last week, as the church calendar marked Pentecost, a time when tiny flames from heaven lit the faces of the early Jesus movement and allowed them to hear and understand each other across barriers of language and ethnicity, flames of a different kind were kindled in dozens of cities across America. Figurative flames of suppressed pain and rage, and literal flames lit by some of those rising up in protest. Flames that burst forth precisely because this country has persistently tried to hold down and stamp out the flames of divine unity and human dignity that allow us to hear and understand each other across those lines of language, ethnicity, and race.

And since then, we have seen the protests continue and grow, and we have seen escalation to violence that has left many injured and several dead. We have seen politicians and public figures weigh in on all sides. We have seen graphic videos and heard calls to quell the protests by any means necessary and calls to continue the protests until real change occurs.

And predictably, we have seen too many discussions devolve into the bickering of negative partisanship. If you're not familiar with the term, I can guarantee you have seen it in action—some sociologists say it is the defining feature of American politics in our time. It's that tendency to define ourselves not by what we are for, but by what we are against. It's when you say “I'm on this side because that side is so bad. Not because I love my side, really, but wow do I hate yours.”

We focus on who started what, who acted worse, who did something in 1995 that means we don't have to listen to what they say or treat them as a human being in 2020.

And all of this bickering about the details and asking “well, what about...?” distracts from the most important fact—the fact that a huge portion of the population—the descendants of enslaved Africans and those who look like them and live in community with them— has risen up in a hundred cities to say that it is intolerable to live in the status quo provided by this country—that people are living so near the edge on a daily basis that one more public tragedy can spark a fire that spreads from coast to coast in a matter of days.

And the more time we spend arguing over who instigated what and who escalated what during the protests, the less time we spend thinking about what happened before the protest and what led to the protest in the first place.

Because to be honest, trying to solve any of these problems by punishing individual protesters or prosecuting individual police officers is like trying to fell a tree by clipping leaves and twigs from the ends of its branches. The trunk and the root remain, and they will grow new twigs and new leaves.

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<sup>1</sup> The sermon was delivered without notes and varies in many places from this manuscript.

But when we look at the root causes and the mighty trunk of American racism, it can be overwhelming. We can immediately succumb to paralysis. We can feel too small and too unimportant, like we know too little. Like there is nothing we can do.

As Darryl said in his sermon last week, by and large this church gets it. We realize there is a problem. We realize that racism is real and that it is still alive and well in the United States today. But we know it has been part of our society from the beginning, and it is still here. What can we do about it?

I saw a lot of people posting quotes on facebook this week from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Most of them were the familiar ones: his dream that his children would be judged for the content of their character instead of the color of their skin; His belief that hate cannot drive out darkness, only love can do that; His insistence that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice. You know, the ones that you hear so often they've almost lost meaning, because you have to ask, why are these still so relevant more than fifty years after Dr. King's death? Why is that dream still deferred? How long is that arc and why does it so often seem to bend the other way? Why hasn't love succeeded in driving out this darkness?

But then I saw another quote that stopped me short. In his last book, *Where do We Go From Here?*, King wrote that "The great majority of Americans are suspended between these opposing attitudes. They are uneasy with injustice but unwilling yet to pay a significant price to eradicate it."

This seems to me to be just as true as it was in 1968. "We are uneasy with injustice but unwilling yet to pay a significant price to eradicate it."

We ache for the loss of innocent Black lives; we ache for the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 and other illnesses on black and brown communities, but what are we willing to do about it? What are we willing to give up for it?

The plain truth is that it will take a lot of hard work to eradicate racial injustice in this country (and a lot of other injustices, too). We like to think about racism as though it were just about our thoughts and our feelings, and that curing it is as simple as ridding our hearts of hatred and prejudice. But in this country racism runs on autopilot. It is inscribed so deeply in our laws, our living situations, and our very landscape that even if we cured all of the prejudicial thoughts in our heads and feelings in our hearts, the racist seeds planted by past generations would continue to bear discriminatory fruit.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying we don't need to work on our hearts and our minds. I think it is all of our duty to continually learn about issues of injustice and oppression, as well as ideas for addressing them with love and care. If you are interested in any resources to learn about the history and present-day effects of slavery, Jim Crow, and other forms of racism, please reach out to me or Pastor Johanna. We will be happy to recommend some resources for you.

But I am saying that getting our hearts and minds straight is not enough. "Injustice," as King also said, "must be rooted out by strong, persistent, and determined action."

Part of that action is peaceful yet persistent protest, but for many of us protest is not an option. I can tell you this blind guy is probably not hitting the streets with his daughters any time soon, and I know many others in this congregation are not suited to protest either, by temperament or physical ability.

And that's ok, because protest is only the first step of change. It is the cry that demands to be heard, the voice that says "we will not allow things to go back to normal until justice is served!"

But protest changes little on its own. Many steps follow after, and they are just as important.

And in this regard, I think we find a resource for our church in the little vignette from scripture we read today. The brand new community of Jesus followers was small, but it was already diverse. All of its members were Jewish, but some were from Judea and others were from points all over the known world—places we call Rome, Greece, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, and Ethiopia. So the distinction here, as the text says, is between the Hebraic Jews on their home turf in Jerusalem and the Hellenistic Jews, who were visitors from abroad.

There is definitely a power difference between the two, as the home-turf crowd knows the city and its ways better than the out-of-towners, and the visitors come to the apostles with a complaint. When the daily food distribution takes place, the home crowd is showing partiality to their own and neglecting the out-of-town widows.

And when the apostles hear the complaint, I will tell you what they don't do. They don't ask if the widows are sure they got less—maybe they're mistaken?. They don't suggest that the widows should maybe take a little personal responsibility and speak up for themselves next time. They don't call the Hebraic members of the community and berate them, or tell them to just fill their hearts with a little more love and everything will be all right.

No, they do two things that should make any Presbyterian sigh in relief: they make a policy and they form a committee! And they make sure the committee has representation from both groups, so that both parties interests are spoken for. It's not a committee to assess the scope of the problem, explore solutions, and present a report at the Equitable Widow Sustenance Task Force meeting in six months. It is a committee to make sure the job gets done and to make sure it gets done equitably.

I love this, because it shows that there are many ways to approach and solve problems. It is not only protest, or preaching, or mounting a heroic campaign. Change, and especially change in a country like America that operates under the rule of law—often comes down to policies and procedures, to representation on committees and in decision-making roles.

And here is where folks in our church could shine! I know there are a lot of people in this church who know their way around policies and bylaws and procedures and all of the bureaucratic parts of governing and administering society that end up being just as important as grand speeches and bright visions of the future.

I know there are people in this congregation who know how to write a well-worded letter. I know there are people in this congregation who know how to get things done with bureaucracies when they need to get things done with bureaucracies. I know there are people who know how to get past the form response and talk to the person who can actually make change happen.

So I want to tell you, each of you has skills that you can put to work making a fairer and more equitable society, just like those seven people that formed the first church committee.

There are organizations who have been thinking through solutions for decades, and all of us can help in some way to bring them to fruition. If you are wondering where and how you can get involved, there are groups we have relationships with—Humanity Way, the Faith Alliance for a Moral Economy, the East bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy, and Stand Up for Racial Justice. Start looking into issue areas and see where you can get involved.

And if we put in the work, and pay that significant price, perhaps future generations can read those hopeful quotes from Dr. King with joy, because they have been realized, and can read the convicting

quotes with gratitude, because there were those who were willing to rise to the challenge and work for a better world.

## Benediction

(written but not delivered in person)

Let me leave you with a final quote, once again from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, King wrote “More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

My friends, let us determine to live this in reverse. Let us go out and use our time well in words and actions striving for justice and for peace.