

## ***Prayer-Full***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship  
on Pentecost – Confirmation Sunday  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC  
May 20, 2018  
Text: 1 Kings 19:11-13 & Acts 2:1-4

Welcome to Pentecost – the birthday of the Christian church!  
Welcome to a birthday party that’s been happening for 2000 years in cathedrals, clapboard buildings and lean-tos, in cities, jungles and mountaintops. Welcome to *the* birthday party of all time, and the one most likely to be overlooked and forgotten as we make our way through our busy, frenetic and too often overwhelming lives. Welcome to the birthday party that changes lives as God breaks into the mundane reality of life.

The original story of Pentecost is found, of course, in the Book of Acts in the New Testament. We read that story just a few moments ago so the details are fresh but how fresh, really? It is a story we know well, after all, and sometimes when we hear the same story over and over again, the details get lost as our attention wanders. There’s the detail that all the disciples, probably more than just the 11, were together in one place. This was probably a first in the aftermath of Jesus’ death since all had returned, albeit briefly, to their lives before Jesus. Then there’s the detail first noted as the Holy Spirit made its presence known in their midst as a sudden rush of violent wind. This was not some gentle breeze wafting airily through the windows. This was a roaring freight train of a wind that filled the whole house, making clear that things were about to be shaken up in a big way. And

if that wasn't enough to get everyone's attention, tongues of fire – little flickering flames – suddenly appeared one above the head of each one present. I admit, this is the detail that always hangs me up. Was there like a little ball of flame that appeared in the middle of everyone that suddenly split into individual flames over everyone's head? Was there a flame in the room, like on a lamp or in a fireplace, that suddenly roared and exploded into the room scaring the heck out of everyone in the process? Or, did little flames just appear, growing from tiny sparks floating over heads instantly making everyone look like human birthday candles? We just don't know. And that's okay.

The most amazing detail by far is that immediately after the little flames appear, each person is filled with the Holy Spirit. This was made evident in a cacophony of noise as each flame-laden person suddenly began speaking in other languages as the Spirit made possible. What other languages? If we continue on in the text we can see it is the languages of all the other people living in Jerusalem at the moment but who were from other countries. The Spirit was proving her presence by suddenly enabling all these disciples to be able to speak in the languages of the people outside their doors making it instantaneously easier to spread the Good News of Jesus to the people in the language of their birth. Now, that is a moment!!

We can just imagine this chaotic scene unfolding, dragging the startled disciples and other folks right along with its momentum. Roaring wind, dancing flames, a cacophony of languages when everyone begins talking at once. Wow! That must have been

unbelievably loud! Impossible to miss even if you were just walking by with no interest in what was happening at all. Even if you had no idea of who Jesus was or why people cared. Pretty hard to miss! So is this always the way God makes God's presence known? Is this always how the Holy Spirit makes its presence felt? Is God's presence in our lives always so impossible to miss? No, not really. And there are other stories in the Bible which remind us of this.

One of my favorites is one of the stories about the great prophet Elijah, the other Old Testament text we read this morning. This little vignette is actually part of a much bigger story about Elijah and how God intervenes when Elijah gets himself into a whole pile of trouble with a very powerful and mean-spirited queen. You may remember hearing her name – Jezebel. Over the eons her name has become synonymous with scheming beautiful women unafraid to use all the power at their disposal to get what they wanted. Elijah crossed Jezebel when he showed up her priests in a big way, making them all look like fools and eventually causing their deaths. Jezebel was so furious she announced her intention to kill Elijah as soon as she could get her hands on him. Needless to say he took off into the desert, alternating between praying and sulking before God. An angel is sent by God to look after Elijah who eventually finds his way into the mountains where he hid in a cleft in the rock. God calls him out and tells him to go stand out on the mountain because the Lord is about to pass by. Reluctantly Elijah does as he's told and suddenly a great roaring wind comes up (sound familiar?) but God was not in the wind.

Then there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, a fire, but God wasn't in the fire either. Then, there was a sound of sheer silence and Elijah knew God had arrived.

So, we have here two very different stories of the arrival of God and God's spirit in two very different situations. One describes an individual's encounter with God in the sound of sheer silence. The other describes a whole group of people encountering God in the midst of a crowded, noisy room. Hardly seems like they're describing the same encounter does it? Well, not according to human standards maybe, but remember we're talking about God. And the amazingly incredible thing about God is that God engages with each of us as we are ready and willing to engage with God. God knows each of us is very different in terms of what will get our attention, what we will find meaning in. For some, it's silence out in nature or inside in our favorite, cozy space. For others its in the midst of people who share our energy and enthusiasm, who have connected with God and each other in the midst of an amazing synergistic movement.

Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, both of these experiences describe the church. Sometimes what we crave when we come to church is peace and quiet, a chance to sit and just be in the presence of God. Other times we need that loud cacophony of joyful noise in worship, and in the work and service of the church. The truth is, the church as a community of the faithful is always both/and, not ever either/or. The church is God's beloved people whenever they come together, whatever they do as God's people. One caveat on this,

though, is that the intent must always be to build up this body of Christ that is the church and not tear it apart through bickering and disagreement. But, bickering and disagreement eventually come up, over big things and small, because, in the end we are all imperfect humans. We are precious to and beloved of God, but we are always imperfect, always in need of improvement and guidance to be who God created each and everyone of us to be. This is the role and function of the church. Plain and simple.

This was also the main focus of the Confirmation program this year. It was not a conventional educational experience, intent on imparting knowledge in the same way our students learn history or the English grammar or the scientific method. This Confirmation experience was designed from the beginning to be precisely that – an experience of church and what it is like to be church together. Our Confirmands did spend some time on content – like what’s in the Bible and how to read the Bible; like learning the basics of the United Church of Christ and how we are different from other Christian traditions, Protestant and Catholic. But we also learned about the invitation of God through Jesus to each of us to make the world a better place, to love God with all that we are and all that we have and to show that love for God by loving others as much as we love ourselves. We immersed ourselves in the issue of homelessness through the Homeless Awareness Vigil, experiencing what it was like to live outside in the cold, snowy darkness if only for a few hours. We learned about hunger as we made a meal for the folks at WARM. We

learned about the importance and the strength of community we find in the church as we volunteered at the Christmas Bazaar and the Valentine Tea and in other ways too. We also learned in an unusual firsthand experience what it might be like to live in the immediate presence of God as we ate and slept, talked and played in God's house overnight during our retreat a few weeks ago. In short, our Confirmands learned about the church and following Jesus by experiencing the church and how the church, each of you, lives out the love of Jesus in ways big and small.

This is why as their Confirmation assignment this year, I did not ask them to write a statement of belief as is the usual custom for Confirmands. Instead, I asked each of them to write a prayer that they would like shared in their church. So, they did and their prayers blew me away by their simplicity and honesty, by their scope from the personal to the global. They have asked me to share their prayers with you this morning since standing up in front of any crowd, but this crowd in particular, was just a little too uncomfortable for them. So, I am honored to share you with you now the prayers of the Confirmation Class of 2018.

From Amanda Dessaulles, a prayer for her grandfather:

*God, I ask you to give my grandpa strength to walk short distances and to have a more positive life. Now, I know you can't make his life perfect again, but please try to give him a little strength to let him pick himself up. I pray for the nurses that help him every day, for Gram for helping him when the nurses aren't there, and his whole family for trying to help him. I thank you for listening to me and I will always love you no matter what even if your help doesn't change*

*him. I appreciate you helping my family and I throughout this horrid journey. In Jesus' name we pray.*

From Hartmut Doerwaldt who will be confirmed on June 10, a prayer for the suffering in Africa:

*Holy God, please bring an end to the Ebola outbreak happening in Africa, and the suffering of those innocent people both infected and affected in any way by the virus. I, and the human race as a whole, have many individualities, some less preferable than others, and we very much appreciate your equal grace whenever it is needed. However, no one deserves the extreme suffering presented to them by the Ebola virus, no matter who they are, how they act or where they live. We are all very thankful for your great undying love, and so I ask you please save all these people from that which they do not deserve. Your grace already blesses every nation and individual, great and small, and we are immensely grateful for this. It's more than we could ever ask for. So again I ask if you could please use this to make amends in Africa. In Jesus' name we pray.*

From Alex Doerwaldt who will also be confirmed on June 10, a prayer for an end to pollution:

*Dear God, may there be an end to all types of pollution around the world, whether it is killing people or animals. Even I take part in such activities like driving in a car or burning fires. May the people live better lives at the ends of pollution and may the animals stop suffering from habitat loss. I am trying to limit polluting activities, but being unsuccessful, now I reach out to you, every day. In your name we pray.*

From Adam Tarasuk, a prayer for the global and the particular:

*Dear God, please bless everyone and everything on earth. I pray for strength to overcome my fears and imperfections. I pray that you will help those in need, and that you will show those who are wrong what they are doing wrong. I thank you for family and food, and every other good thing on earth.*

And finally, an honest assessment of prayer from Audrey Walker:

*We have spent a lot of time learning as Confirmands what a prayer is and what a prayer is not. I have learned that a prayer is anything you need it to be. I can stand here and pray to God and Jesus but I would prefer to pray to something more tangible, you the congregation. I have learned through this Confirmation process that my family consists of much more than I thought it did. Through this experience any prayer that I can think of has been answered. I thank you all for being my family and I look forward to happiness and health for all of us in the future. Let us pray.*

Thank you, God, for these amazing young people in our midst. Hear us as we end this message by saying together: O God, hear our prayers. *O God, hear our prayers.* Amen.