



# Looks Like God Wants a Church

*TEXT*  
*Acts 2:1-13*

May 31, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I have a love/hate relationship with Pentecost. There's no disrespect for the text, but oh my goodness, Pentecost is so ... dramatic. The Spirit comes so vividly you can hear her, and the timid disciples start speaking in foreign tongues, learned without the benefit of Rosetta Stone. There is fire dancing on their heads. It seems like an unnecessary risk and not something we would want to happen today — particularly since many are still getting our haircuts at home, or some are coming perilously close to sporting the “do” you had in your high school year-book photo.

Read a little farther, and it says that Peter preached and 3,000 joined the church in one day. Really ... 3,000? I don't think even Rodger Nishioka has a sermon that could cause 3,000 to join in one day. I'd like to hear it if he does. Pentecost is one of those days that can make you feel a bit inadequate.

And yet, I need this story because it proclaims a life-changing truth: No one goes it alone. The day began with terrified disciples locked inside, and outside there were Parthians and Medes and Elamites,

residents of Mesopotamia. But by the end of the day, these strangers are calling each other brothers and sisters. If nothing else, Pentecost shows us that God wants us to be family.

It's really basic — and also really complicated. We are living that right now. Almost 30 percent of all reported cases, as well as deaths from Covid-19, are in the United States. So, the CDC recommends wearing a mask when we are in public. It can provide some protection for you, but even more so for your neighbor. But some refuse to make this sacrifice for the common good.

The *Kansas City Star* reported that some refuse to wear a mask because the virus is media hype, “fake news.”<sup>1</sup> Our communal life is increasingly threatened by those who believe they can create their own facts. They assume that they can just intuit expertise about everything. It's dangerous. Others say they wouldn't wear a mask because it's against the Constitution. No CDC, no governor, no one can require them to wear a mask. It's an infringement on their freedom.

This is an immature expression of freedom because it is all rights and no responsibilities.

It sees the basis of freedom as elimination of any obligation to the neighbor: I can't be required to sacrifice for the common good. Do you think that's America? Maybe ... certainly for many. But it's not Christian faith.

David Brooks says our culture is increasingly defined by what he calls “hyper-individualism”<sup>2</sup> — a non-relational claim that freedom means having no obligation to the common good.

On Pentecost, the day began with fearful followers inside, and outside they were from Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia; in other words, they were defined by how they were disconnected. And by the end of the day, they were seeing each other as brothers and sisters; as community. The most basic work of the Spirit is to create community.

These days, some are very cavalier about the coronavirus. My own thought — and you may see this differently than I do — but I think we are in a crisis. The United States death toll will likely double the number of American soldiers killed in Vietnam. That's a crisis. I think it is foolish to waste a crisis.

So, what do we learn from this? Well, one thing I have

learned is Zoom. I have gotten my Zoom merit badge in the last two months. I'm not crazy about it. Oh, it was cool at first. I do like seeing the faces of folks. But it is unsatisfying because it both connects us and accentuates our distance from one another. And lately, I sense a weariness with it all. Do you feel that? A weariness, as we are increasingly uncertain of when things will return to normal or even what normal might be.

In this weariness, I think we are being reminded that we need each other. The voice of independence is so strong in our culture that it is now seen as a virtue to refuse to sacrifice for the common good. I think this crisis is teaching us, at least reminding us, that we can't go it alone. Pentecost turns individuals into family.

Creating community takes work.

In the early 1980s, British diplomat Victor Mishcon was pursuing an elusive peace deal in the Middle East. He invited King Hussein of Jordan and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to his house for dinner. They had the meal and a pleasant conversation. But when they got up to leave, Mishcon told them they had to do the dishes. He had the king wash and the foreign minister dry, working side by side. This was the point of the evening to him.<sup>3</sup>

I think that is a view of Pentecost — because community is built through shared commitment. And those who claim

that it is a virtue to refuse to sacrifice for the common good, they aren't describing freedom; they are just describing what it is to be alone.

I have seen a bit of the Spirit of Pentecost alive in you recently. No tongues of fire, no strange speech.

As soon as this crisis hit, some of you sent checks to the church, both to keep the church being the church, but some said, "I want this money to help those in our church family who are going to be hurt financially by this crisis." You recognize it is both human and holy to sacrifice for the common good.

Others of you have been making calls every day, checking in on friends and sometimes strangers, to make sure we are all holding up in this long season of uncertainty. It's a sacrifice for the common good.

Our Mission Sewing friends have sewn and distributed over 2,000 masks. That's what Pentecost looks like.

In scripture, Pentecost is so dramatic: tongues of fire and rushing winds and foreign tongues. But you ... you are speaking a language of sacrificial love that is often a foreign language these days. But I see the Spirit alive in you every time you treat the neighbor as a brother, as a sister.

You wouldn't think so, but that actually is pretty dramatic these days.

---

<sup>1</sup>*Kansas City Star*, May 10, 2020, "Emotions Unmasked"

<sup>2</sup>David Brooks, *The Second Mountain* (2019), p. 17

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 287

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.