

Prayer:

Loving God, we come to you in humble gratitude. Remind us once again that every breath is a gift of your love. Every moment of existence is evidence of your Grace.

Gracious God, we thank you for the Church. Keep us one in faith and service. We praise you for your Holy Spirit who now guides our steps and brings us gifts of faith and love, who prays in us and prompts our worship of you. For all those who work at the building up of your church – those who lead, those who serve, those who clean – we give you our most heartfelt thanks.

We see your glory in the abundant earth before us, in the daily blessings that sustain us: food on the table, a meaningful conversation, laughter among friends, the bright eyes of a child.

And yet our hearts are heavy with the burdens of the world. We feel overwhelmed by distress and heartache. Even worse, we grow indifferent.

God of hope, enliven us. God, wake us up. God save us from half-life, half-truths, half-heartedness. Send us the wind of the Holy Spirit and startle us with your truth. Let your joy so indwell in our being that even in the worst of times, our hearts sing your praise.

Amen

Sermon:

Today is Pentecost: the day the Church was created, 2000 years ago. It is a time for celebration, reflection and renewal.

I don't know about all of you, but I am definitely in need of some spiritual renewal. The world feels bleak right now. I'm not sure I'm in the mood for celebration.

In today's scripture Jesus tells the disciples, "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." When my father was diagnosed with cancer, the first thing I did was go into a church and pray with every fiber of my being that God would take it away. He didn't. I am certain that those children and teachers in Uvalde, Texas prayed that God would save them. He didn't. There are so many prayers that go unanswered every single day. Where is God? I'm doing what I've been told – asking in Jesus' name. So why isn't it working?

I wish I knew. I'm just the sub and I'm sure Jerry has a far more eloquent and informed answer to this question.

In some faith traditions, unanswered prayers are our fault. We need to obey God's commandments before our prayers can be answered. If we have not confessed our sins, we cannot expect him to answer our prayers. My problem with this belief is that it doesn't feel like the fully encompassing love that God offers us. I don't love my children only when they're good. Sure, they are easy to adore when they are obedient, with teeth brushed and hair combed, on their best behavior. But isn't the point of being a parent to love them even when it's hard? When they're irritable or defiant or worse (not that we'd know anything about that in the Scott family).

Another theory is that God knows better than we do. Parents do not always give their children exactly what they want when they ask for it. One pastor has said that in fact He does answer: God often says "no" or "not now" or "yes, but not in the way you want or expect." According to Paul Baxter, "The God as revealed in Christianity is not a genie in a lamp who will do exactly what we want if we have enough faith to rub the lamp via prayer. Such a God would not be God, but our servant, our personal genie."

What we *think* we need must be balanced by God with what He *knows* we need. As hard as it is, maybe our role is to just listen. Instead of repeatedly asking for something, maybe the answer is to be still and let the prayer come to us. By being quiet, being present, and being open, we contemplate what it is God has in mind for us.

A book I once read called this the prayer that never fails: "Thy will be done." Thy will be done.

A satisfying thought, but it doesn't really meet my desire to understand why God won't just take away the hurt and pain. For that, I turn to Paul.

Paul tells us that there is actually power in the pain.

From Second Corinthians Ch. 12: Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Reading this reminds me of the modern writer, Brene Brown. Some of you may have heard of her. She is a social worker who has researched and written extensively on courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy. She gained popular notice about 10 years ago with a TED Talk titled “The Power of Vulnerability.”

Brown’s research found that vulnerability opens people to love, joy, and belonging by allowing them to better know themselves, and thus to more deeply connect with other people. The ability to feel connected is what gives life meaning. In order for that connection to happen, we need to let ourselves be seen. Being deeply seen requires being vulnerable. Being vulnerable takes courage. Courage comes from a belief that we are enough – imperfect as we are. When we accept that we are imperfect, and we are going to struggle, but we are worthy of love and belonging, when we offer that compassion to ourselves, it’s easier to offer this compassion to others. Our authentic connection with others comes when we are willing to let go of who we think we should be in order to be who we are. We believe that we are enough.

This courage to feel the hard emotions – fear, shame, disappointment – means we can also feel joy. We know gratitude. We understand what happiness looks like.

It’s not that God is testing us. Or that God is punishing us. By tearing us open, he is inviting us into communion. God is allowing us to become more fully connected – to each other and to him. When one of us is in pain, we sit with you in the pain. It’s true that I feel more compassion and empathy as a result of the struggles I’ve experienced. And that this opens me to truly knowing the joy of what it means to love another, as God has loved me.

Pentecost is a time of personal spiritual renewal, but it’s also a time to celebrate the birth of the Church.

The reading from Acts describes this moment: The apostles are gathered in a house in Jerusalem to celebrate the traditional Jewish Pentecost. Suddenly a terrific wind comes from heaven and fills the place. The disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit, causing them to speak in tongues. The crowds of visitors are astonished because every pilgrim hears the apostles speaking to him or her in their own foreign language. Some people in the crowd thought the apostles were drunk.

I don’t usually espouse a literal reading of the Bible, but I do enjoy imagining this scene.

And then Peter seizes the moment and explains exactly what’s happening: they’re not drunk, this is the fulfillment of prophecy. They are empowered by the Holy Spirit. He takes this opportunity to preach to them about Jesus Christ and God’s plan of salvation. By being

baptized in the name of Jesus your sins will be forgiven and you, too, will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The beginning of the Christian church.

As magical as that scene may feel, from that first Pentecost until now, it has always been the belief of the Church that the Holy Spirit directs and guides us collectively and individually. God is not a distant being and the ascended Jesus has not abandoned us. We have the Spirit of God living and working in our lives and in our Church. The connection we feel in gathering as seekers of God is the Holy Spirit at work.

We all come from different places, yet on Sunday morning we gather in love. It's a hopeful message – we live in a country that feels more divided than ever, but here we are, sharing hope, seeking to understand. God is real and we are not alone.

There is still much work to be done outside these church walls, but here is a place to start. Here, we can be still and listen for what God wants for us. We can be vulnerable and open to connection with each other and with God.

I leave you with this challenge: As we are coming back together, now is the time to consider what kind of church we want to be, what kind of community we want to be. What do we expect of each other? What can we offer one another? What can each of us give for the good of the whole? On this day of Pentecost we celebrate the past, but we also look ahead to the future. We've lost a lot over the past two years apart – longtime and beloved church members have departed this earth. Some families have decided to seek a spiritual home elsewhere. Many, I think, are simply out of the habit of coming to church on Sunday mornings. Now is the time to consider how the Holy Spirit is moving within us. Because it's not division or despair that will lead to the end of the Church. It's inertia.

Benediction:

Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching one another in all wisdom, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.