



# MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

## **"Spiritual Inclusivity"**

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church  
on Pentecost Sunday, May 28, 2023, from Acts 2 & Acts 8*

Pulitzer Prize winning author Annie Dillard once wrote "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

I'm sorry we don't have crash helmets, life preservers, or signal flares to offer you this Pentecost Sunday, but we do have Dillard's question: Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke on this day that commemorates the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the church? Jesus promised the disciples they'd receive power when the Holy Spirit came, but the power that arrived was far greater than any of their expectations, more potent than anything they were prepared for. So potent, every disciple spent the rest of their lives struggling to figure out what Pentecost really meant, to comprehend the true force of its power, to grasp the full scope of its implications for the world. The first century disciples are not alone in their struggle. Today, many Christians still haven't the foggiest idea what Pentecost means. We continue to invoke a power we do not fully understand.

The second chapter of Acts begins with the words, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." Which reminds me of one of my favorite poems. "When day comes," it says, "we step out of the shade, aflame and unafraid. The new dawn blooms as we free it. For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it."<sup>i</sup> (repeat) I love this poem because I see it as a vivid description of what happened to the disciples at Pentecost. I also love this poem because it's been banned in the State of Florida. This is the last stanza of Amanda Gorman's inaugural poem, "The Hill We Climb," which according to a complaint filed by a Miami-Dade County parent has "indirect hate messages". You know what they say, "Truth sounds like hate to those who hate the truth." If people knew what Pentecost really meant, they'd probably try to ban the book of Acts!



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Fifty days after the resurrection, the disciples were huddled together in a room behind closed doors in Jerusalem—waiting. Waiting for the power to arrive that Jesus promised, when suddenly something extraordinary happened and in a matter of minutes, these cowardly Galileans who were fecklessly hiding behind closed doors, petrified and immobilized by the Empire, became courageous witnesses who boldly proclaimed the good news of Jesus despite the threat of prison, torture, and death. The very same disciples who had betrayed, abandoned, denied Jesus, suddenly became fearless rebels and the Roman Empire's most wanted. What happened to them? Ten words: a violent wind, tongues of fire, the Holy Spirit—Pentecost.

Pentecost means "50 days" and it was a major Jewish holiday called *Shavuot* or "Weeks" that occurred 50 days after Passover, one of the three yearly festivals that required pilgrimages to Jerusalem. It began as a harvest festival celebrating the covenant of Noah, but later became a commemoration of the Torah because it was considered the day God gave Israel the Ten Commandments. Traditionally on Pentecost, Jewish communities read the book of Ruth focusing on its theme of loving-kindness and eat delicious dairy based deserts because King Solomon said, "the Torah gets stuck under your tongue like milk and honey." Long before the wind rushed in and fire fell on the disciples, the Jewish people celebrated Pentecost as a multi-layered feast with story, ceremony, food, and love.

So, when the wind blew in and tongues of fire descended, it was as if God took all the potent themes of Pentecost and swirled them all together into one big powerful storm of thundering wind and bolts of lightning that ignited a fire inside the disciples so incendiary they could not keep it to themselves. The wind blew away all their fear and the fire filled them with a passion that could not be contained. The power they were waiting for had finally arrived. The day Jesus promised had finally come, but it was far more intense than they'd anticipated. Yet, they stepped out of the shade, aflame and unafraid. They opened their eyes to see the new dawn bloom. And with fire in their eyes and on their tongues, they remembered "there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it."

The time had come for a new harvest, a new covenant, a new Torah, a new law, a new outpouring of loving-kindness. In fact, a whole new people were formed that day—made from God's breath and fire—a people who would come to be known first as The Way, the "ekklesia," the Church. Today we celebrate the birthday of the Church, the power and promise of the Spirit that reminds us that as individuals and as a community of faith we were not born once and for all 2000 years ago, but we are born again, and again, and again, every single year.



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But there's a question that arises from the crowds who were amazed and perplexed by what they saw that day—a question we're still asking. What does this mean? A few cynical onlookers claimed the disciples were drunk. But Peter tells us the Spirit's primary work in the world will be the work of inclusivity; the pouring out of the Spirit on all flesh, causing all people, regardless of gender, age, or social status to dream. Peter drew on Joel's powerful vision of the Spirit, which sounds wonderful, but is lacking in specificity. What does it really mean? What did it mean then? What does it mean today? When it comes to the Spirit's work in the book of Acts, Peter and Paul get all the attention, but neither is the disciple that went the farthest. In the old hymn, "There is a Balm in Gilead" it says, "If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus and say, "He died for all." (repeat) That last part is the story of an apostle who went the greatest distance and followed the Spirit to the ends of the earth. His name was Philip. We don't talk enough about Philip.

Not long after Pentecost, Philip began preaching, casting out demons, healing the sick and bringing joy to the people in Samaria. But then suddenly the Spirit commanded him to go South, down a deserted road from Jerusalem to Gaza. In the words of Star Trek, Philip was sent "where no disciple had ever gone before." But Philip followed the Spirit lead, and, on that road, he encountered someone incredibly surprising. God sent Philip to find someone God was searching for, someone God wanted, someone God desired. God told Philip, "Go down the road from Jerusalem to Gaza." And when Philip saw the chariot, God said, "Go over to the Ethiopian eunuch." This was someone God was searching for, someone God wanted to embrace, someone God wanted to include, someone God wanted to belong, someone who represents what the church today—2000 years after its birthday—is still struggling to love, to embrace, and to include—the Ethiopian eunuch.

Eunuchs were quite common in the ancient world, typically serving a variety of functions in the royal court. They could be attendants, domestics, religious specialist, royal guards, government officials, guardians of women and children, or in the case of the Ethiopian—a financial secretary for the Queen. But there's one very important thing about eunuchs—they were neither male nor female. They were considered "androgenous," "non-binary," you might even say "transgender." The term was not available at the time, but they were queer, and it was their queerness—their gender bending identity that placed them on a lower rung of the social ladder and in a servile position. In Jewish law, eunuchs were explicitly banned from worship. They were not permitted to enter the assembly of God, and they were not allowed to become priests. Eunuchs were "second class citizens" who were marginalized, oppressed, excluded, and rejected. Luke tells us the Ethiopian eunuch had just been to Jerusalem trying to worship, which means they had just experienced exclusion—they were on the way home from being rejected and humiliated.



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Do you know what it feels like to be excluded, rejected, humiliated? Queer South African poet Lee Mokobe shared the experience in powerful a TedTalk.

The first time I uttered a prayer was in a glass-stained cathedral.  
I was kneeling long after the congregation was on its feet,  
dip both hands into holy water,  
trace the trinity across my chest,  
my tiny body drooping like a question mark  
all over the wooden pew.  
I asked Jesus to fix me,  
and when he did not answer  
I befriended silence in the hopes that my sin would burn  
and salve my mouth would dissolve like sugar on tongue,  
but shame lingered as an aftertaste.  
And in an attempt to reintroduce me to sanctity,  
my mother told me of the miracle I was,  
said I could grow up to be anything I want.  
I decided to be a boy...  
I was the mystery of an anatomy,  
a question asked but not answered,  
tightroping between awkward boy and apologetic girl,  
and when I turned 12, the boy phase wasn't deemed cute anymore.  
It was met with nostalgic aunts who missed seeing my knees in the shadow of skirts,  
who reminded me that my kind of attitude would never bring a husband home,  
that I exist for heterosexual marriage and child-bearing.  
And I swallowed their insults along with their slurs.  
Naturally, I did not come out of the closet.  
The kids at my school opened it without my permission.  
Called me by a name I did not recognize,  
said "lesbian,"  
but I was more boy than girl, more Ken than Barbie...  
No one ever thinks of us as human  
because we are more ghost than flesh,  
because people fear that my gender expression is a trick,  
that it exists to be perverse,  
that it ensnares them without their consent,



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that my body is a feast for their eyes and hands  
and once they have fed off my queer,  
they'll regurgitate all the parts they did not like.  
They'll put me back into the closet, hang me with all the other skeletons.  
I will be the best attraction.  
Can you see how easy it is to talk people into coffins,  
to misspell their names on gravestones...  
I wonder how long it will be  
before the trans suicide notes start to feel redundant,  
before we realize that our bodies become lessons about sin  
way before we learn how to love them.  
Like God didn't save all this breath and mercy,  
like my blood is not the wine that washed over Jesus' feet.  
My prayers are now getting stuck in my throat.  
Maybe I am finally fixed,  
maybe I just don't care,  
maybe God finally listened to my prayers.<sup>ii</sup>

The eunuch had been excluded, rejected, and humiliated by the religious community to which they desperately desired to belong. But exclusion, rejection, and humiliation are not the end of the story, are they? No because God was searching for the eunuch, God was sending Philip to the eunuch, and the eunuch was already reading the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah speaks of one who would come to be rejected and humiliated for our sakes so none of us would ever have to be rejected or humiliated again, someone who took on all the rejection and humiliation the Empire could dole out and lived to tell the story. Jesus was waiting for the eunuch in the pages of Isaiah to free the eunuch from shame and embrace them as a beloved child of God.

And there was also promise in Isaiah, a promise the eunuch would soon discover just a few verses from where they were reading—a promise that one day God would tear down all the walls, smash all the boundaries, and overturn all the laws that excluded, rejected, and humiliated eunuchs. God would even overturn God's own law to include the eunuch. Isaiah 56:3 proclaims, "Do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree. For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters of Israel; I will give them an everlasting name that shall never be cut off.'" What the eunuch found, what Philip saw, was that God's promise God from Isaiah 56 was getting ready to be fulfilled in a river by the side of the road to Gaza.



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Pentecost doesn't just mean everybody gets the Spirit. Pentecost isn't just for Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judeans, Cappadocians, Pontians, Asians, Phrygians, Pamphylans, Egyptians, Libyans, Romans, Cretans, and Arabs. Pentecost doesn't just mean everybody gets to dream—regardless of their gender, age, or social standing. Pentecost also means everyone gets included—especially the people who have been cut off from community—especially the people who have been excluded, rejected, and humiliated by the Empire or by organized religion—especially the eunuchs, the queer, the non-binary, and transgender. Pentecost means that God not only wants the eunuch and the queer in the community, but God is searching for them. God is sending people out looking for them. Jesus said, "the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few," because we're not searching for the people God is searching for—the marginalized, the outcast, the exile. Pentecost means that God wants Lee Mokobe and all queer people at the center of the community—not on the edges or periphery, but in the center of it all.

Whether we believe it or not, Pentecost has always been about intentional inclusion. It has always been about the Spirit's work of making community by searching for the excluded, rejected, and humiliated people on the margins of church and society and joining us to the other, celebrating our differences as gift and not as a threat, creating spaces free of homophobia and transphobia, spaces of psychological safety for those at the intersection of multiple sources of oppression.

When the eunuch realized the humiliated one was Jesus and that God had sent Philip to take away their shame, when the eunuch realized the promise of Isaiah had been fulfilled and they were no longer excluded or rejected but given a monument and new name better than even the children of Israel, the eunuch asked Philip, "Here is water, what is to prevent me from being baptized?" And Philip was speechless because he knew the answer. The answer was "absolutely nothing." That's why the eunuch went home rejoicing because they knew there was absolutely nothing that could separate them from the love of God and the community of the faithful—absolutely nothing that could stop the Spirit's power of inclusivity.

You know they can ban books about inclusivity, but they can't ban the Holy Spirit. They can make laws that target transgender people, but they can legislate the Holy Spirit and one day God will overturn all those laws. They can try to pass "Slates of Hate" that oppress LGBTQ people, but they can't stop the power of love. They can try to exclude, reject, and humiliate people like the eunuch, but in the end, they will not be successful because the tide of history, the full force of the Spirit, and the whole weight of God's glory is aligned against them. The meaning of Pentecost is that there is absolutely nothing that can stop the rushing wind and absolutely nothing that can stop the sacred fire that blows through boundaries and burns down barriers.



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There is absolutely nothing that can prevent the inclusive power of God’s Spirit from joining people together. There are no bans, bills, school boards, city councils, politicians, pastors, or parents, no deacons, churches, theologians, representatives, governors, or presidents that can stop the power of God’s Spirit. Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, not even the gates of hell can stand against the power of Holy Spirit or the community that follows where the Spirit leads. The day has come for us to live into this awesome truth and to understand the power we so blithely invoke. So may we step out of the shade today once and for all, aflame and unafraid. Remembering that a new dawn blooms as we free it. For there is always light, there is always hope, there is always love, there is always inclusion, there is always community, there is always belonging, there is always liberation, if only we’re brave enough to see it, if only we’re brave enough to be it.

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<sup>i</sup> Amanda Gorman, “The Hill We Climb,” poem at the inauguration of President Joe Biden, January 20, 2021.

<sup>ii</sup> Lee Mokobe, “On Being Trans,” *TedWomen2015*, Monterey California.