

Sermon – Pentecost Sunday – St Luke and St Matthew Brooklyn

John 14: 8-17, 25-27

This past week the United States, British and other allied nations commemorated the 75th anniversary D-Day. On Tuesday June 6, 1944, the largest seaborne invasion in history started to unfold on the rugged shores of Normandy in France. It was to be the beginning of the end of the second world war.

War is a horrible and violent part of the human experience. Many, mainly young people are killed and injured. Life for many is destroyed. Villages, towns and cities are destroyed. People flee to safety and become refugees in foreign lands. The rebuilding effort following conflict is immense and expensive. War and the peace following war, require the immense energy of many talented people to resolve the problems that exist and allow everyday citizens to return to raising their families and building communities.

The energy of people to rebuild after WWII resulted in a boom in new communities in the 1950s. Suburbanization resulted in a huge exodus of people from cities. It was also a time of immense growth in all religious organizations. The church was at the center of community life and flourished like no other time in its existence, except maybe after the first Pentecost. The Holy Spirit moved through those churches and communities. Sunday schools were full of children of all ages. The pews were so full new, larger churches had to be built. Our own Bishop DeWolfe bought land and built many, many churches across Long Island. Revivals occurred and Billy Graham's crusades drew thousands to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. It was heady times and people were driven on by the energy that surrounded them on every side.

The vast movement of people drove the economy. In the 1960s, as people settled down thoughts turned back to the segregation of society. The rights of many in society were being trampled on. The fight for civil rights became the issue of the decade. African Americans long subject to suppression, physical and economic slavery, rose-up to claim what was rightfully being denied them, equal rights as enshrined in the Constitution. The energy of the movement's leaders from Martin Luther King Jr. to Malcolm X drew in millions of people to the cause. The effect of their protests and actions were the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1964, which were large steps toward equality.

Also in the 1960's other groups of people began to energize for release from their own suppression. This month we celebrate with the LGBT community the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots. On June 28, 1969, the NYC Police raided the Stonewall Inn in the West Village. The Stonewall was a gathering place for gay men, lesbians, and transgender people. It was a safe place that protected the vulnerable from violence, discrimination and from arrest. The raid that night galvanized the community who within six months had formed two activist organizations. On the first anniversary of the riots the first gay pride parade was staged.

In each of these historic examples people rose-up to confront problems with energy most of them didn't know they had. Equality and integration became the motivation of these two protest movements that continue to fight for justice now 50+ years on. Change often only comes from

the collective efforts of many people coming together around a common issue. If we were all chilled out and laid back nothing would change. The powerful would remain and grow more powerful, and the weak and vulnerable would become weaker and more vulnerable. The fight goes on every day for justice and equality.

When rights have been won the energy of the movement starts to wane. But the defeated, those that oppose equality and justice, often just slink into the background to regroup, plotting ways to achieve their objectives of overturning the hard-won freedoms of these movements. We are seeing this again and again with constant attacks on the Voting Rights Act, the Affordable Care Act, LGBT rights, women's health rights and so on.

The Christian church is the Jesus Movement, and is just like any of these civil rights movements in that it always remains vulnerable. Nothing is so fatal to Christianity than indifference. The church worldwide has lost its mojo. It seems to have become irrelevant to so many people. The scandals of sexual abuse, clerical misconduct, and suppression of women and LGBT people have taken an incredible toll on the essential message of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' ministry was all about challenging power structures and seeing, touching and communing with the powerless – women, foreigners and refugees, the sick, the disabled, the lepers and slaves. He went out of his way to listen to them and restore them to wholeness and dignity. Jesus taught us that God loves all people, and wants them to reciprocate with acts of love, justice and peace. Many people feel that the rejection they experience by society and religious people is rejection by God. We are called to counter these destructive feelings.

Today we arrive at the annual celebration of Pentecost. We can read about and hear of the incredible events of the original Pentecost, when God sent the Holy Spirit in power to be with the first believers. Pentecost marked the arrival of the winds of change that brought the Holy Spirit to all the nations.

As the disciples gathered together suddenly from heaven came a great sound like the rush of a violent wind. The sound was so loud the whole city of Jerusalem heard it. The disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit in a way that was different to when Jesus breathed on them when he appeared to them after his resurrection. This time the disciples could speak in languages and ways unknown to them before. It allowed them to be understood by the many foreigners residing in Jerusalem.

The events of that morning all those years ago split the crowd between those with curious minds and those with skeptical minds. Peter rose to address the crowd and to correct their assertion that the disciples were drunk. He reminded them that the prophet Joel, who they should have been aware of, had predicted a day when God would pour out the Spirit upon all flesh and that each would prophesy. No one was to miss out and even the slaves and women, considered non-persons were to be beneficiaries of God's saving grace in sending the Holy Spirit for all.

God's plan for the salvation of the world required that Jesus' message of justice, love and hope had to be taken out to the world. The disciples not only needed linguistic skills but also needed

an advocate and a guide to reside within them as they faced up to the difficult work that lay ahead.

The Holy Spirit that touched the disciples of Jesus all those years ago, touches us every day. Together, we magnify the Holy Spirit in our community and the world. It takes energy to build communities, especially Christian communities that face skeptical neighbors. The culture of the western liberal democracies is no less perverse now than the culture of first century Palestine. The power and elite prosper and the oppressed fight for justice.

When we welcome the Holy Spirit into our lives, we are freed from judgment because we are drawn deeper and deeper in our relationship with God. Self-judgment gives way to transformation, fear of punishment gives way to hope. This is a journey that requires continued nurturing. We need to constantly cultivate our souls to keep the fiery power of the Holy Spirit stoked so that we might continue with the energy needed to change the world.

The Church of St Luke and St Matthew, and the church universal, is as relevant today as it was when it was formed, and when it rebuilt itself after fires and other setbacks. The work we are called to do to help develop our own souls, and to reach out to those in our neighborhood who feel the church is irrelevant and has nothing to offer, comes from the power that the Holy Spirit nurtures in each of us.

The power of the Holy Spirit helps us to overcome a lack of energy, helps us to overcome complacency, helps us to persevere as we seek to restore people with God through Jesus Christ, helps us to talk about our own spiritual journeys with each other and helps us to see the immense opportunity that exists right here, to be a beacon of hope for this neighborhood.

So, let's get fired up together by the power of the Holy Spirit and channel our collective energy to nurturing our souls and nurturing those that we encounter on the path to God's promise of justice and freedom.

Amen