

Rev. Rebecca Schlatter Liberty
Sermon preached at Redeemer Lutheran Church, Bangor, Maine
May 20, 2018—Day of Pentecost & PR's final Sunday with Redeemer
Texts: Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

For our Gathering Hymn following a Thanksgiving for Baptism, we sang "This is the Spirit's Entry Now" and were sprinkled with baptismal water.

During the children's time, I gave each of the children a small mirror marked with a Sharpie marker: "I love you. You are mine." In the middle was marked a cross, which would appear on their forehead when they look in the mirror. It recalled a faith formation lesson about baptism from a year or two ago, and also recalled the fact that I have appreciated so much being present at many of their baptisms (more than 10 of them in the past four years!). In the original lesson we put the cross and words on a mirror in our homes, but this was a portable version to be added to the "Starting Something New" kits the children made recently in our final faith formation together—a bag full of helpful reminders to take with you into the excitement and nervousness of something new. God's love and Spirit in us through baptism is one of the most important things to take with us on any new journey!

This is the Spirit's Entry Now

On our last Sunday together as pastor and congregation, we are both taking a leap of faith into something new and as yet unknown. Each of us is in the process of starting a new chapter that has not yet been revealed. So it's fitting that we say farewell on Pentecost, because these things were also true of the disciples on that watershed day.

It's hard to miss the energy and mystery and urgency of the Pentecost story in Acts. Rush of wind, tongues of fire, languages from everywhere all proclaiming good news, disciples beginning a new chapter in which they will carry the gospel to the ends of earth. The urgent question posed by Jesus' death and ascension, the question of how Jesus' ministry will continue in his absence, has been joyfully and energetically answered: Jesus' love and teaching and healing and feeding will continue through his followers, who are baptized with the Holy Spirit. Through *us*.

As Jesus' followers are about to jump into a new Spirit-led ministry, Pentecost has this kind of locker room feel, of teammates about to enter a game, getting inspired to jump in with all they've got. They have what they need now: the Spirit has descended, just as promised. The disciples have been called and empowered to go share God's love and "deeds of power." Go get 'em, team!

The hymn I had originally chosen to accompany this message was "God of tempest, God of whirlwind." The title alone captures the energy and mystery and urgency of Pentecost, and so do the rest of the lyrics. Let's sing the first verse now and you'll see what I mean; it's #400.

God of tempest, God of whirlwind, as on Pentecost descend!

*Drive us out from sheltered comfort; past these walls your people send!
Sweep us into costly service, there with Christ to bear the cross; there with Christ to
bear the cross!*

It's hard to find a more "go get 'em" hymn than that one! (Except possibly our sending hymn today, "We Are Called," which was also the sending hymn at Pastor Elaine's and my installation into team ministry.) I was sure that "God of Tempest, God of Whirlwind" was the hymn to sing on this Pentecost. But as this day approached, something else became clear along with the energy and urgency. It was anxiety, mine and maybe yours too.

This is not one of those farewells where the transition pastor makes way for the newly called pastor. It's not one of those farewells where you send your pastor on confidently to the next call in ministry. You are still looking for your next pastor, and I am still looking for work outside the church, here in Bangor. For all of us, it may be a while yet before we see what blessings and challenges our next chapter will hold.

When you don't know *what* exactly you're jumping into, "Go get 'em, team!" can sound more scary than energizing. The first place we might look for reassurance is our story of ministry together, and remember that we already have quite a bit of practice with change and the anxiety that goes with it.

Four years ago in January 2014, Pastor Elaine informed Redeemer that she wanted to step back from full-time ministry. Having been in conversation with the bishop and the Redeemer council, she offered a possibility for a next step (which to this day she still calls "her brilliant idea"!): A team ministry in which she would serve quarter-time and I would serve $\frac{3}{4}$ -time.

After months of discernment about how those different roles would fit together, in March of 2014 we became a 3-way team of two pastors and congregation. It was definitely an adjustment for Redeemer from Pastor Elaine's ministry of 17 years. Many things changed in those three years, everything from the church pews, to new ways of communicating about church life and finances, to more young children participating in worship, to letting go of some ministries for which there was no longer the same need and energy. It was a life-giving and sometimes challenging partnership, in which you adapted to changes with grace and compassion and excitement about the future.

Then you adapted again when Pastor Elaine retired last May. You assembled a transition team, surveyed the congregation, did a lot of discernment about the current congregation and resources, and commissioned a call committee to seek your next pastor. When it became clear that a new pastor would not be called before the end of my year as transition pastor, you began planning for ministry in the in-between time. (Many of you know what this is like, as you had a similar in-between time before Pastor Elaine was called in 1997.)

There are yet many changes to come. Our world is changing, and younger generations do not have the same ways of belonging to religious institutions that our parents and grandparents had. Having seen you all adapt to changes over these past four years, I have

seen the skills you have for adapting. Sometimes I wonder if maybe our time together was a chance to practice small changes so that when bigger changes come in the future, you will not be intimidated. Will there be anxiety? Sure—but you know how to handle that together.

So maybe there's a better hymn we could sing that prays for the wisdom and courage to face whatever comes our way. Let's try verse 1 of #705.

*God of grace and God of glory, on your people pour your power;
Crown your ancient church's story, bring its bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour; for the facing of this hour!*

Over the past four years, I have been blessed by the wisdom and courage of the mutual ministry team. Ardie Hacker, Don Curtis, Pam Shellberg (while she was still here), and then Angela Domina met with me every 4-8 weeks for conversation about community and ministry and life and whatever the Spirit brought to our attention. In our last meeting this week, they asked me what I had learned, personally, from four years with Redeemer. As a partial answer, I responded that it had something to do with growing into motherhood—when I came here I had a one-year-old who wasn't even walking yet, and today you see my rambunctious 5-year-old son [who helped with the sprinkling!] and 2-year-old daughter.

So, Angie, Don, and Ardie, here is the rest of my answer. As I've tried to find my way in mothering small children, I've learned from the parents who came before me—many of you included—that children often “jump into” new things with more confidence when you first help them feel safe, held always in your love, no matter what. That's the foundation, the home base, for adventures and learning and a bravery that's different from recklessness. We might say that confidence from our parents is where we first get our wisdom and courage.

Of course we don't always *do* this well as parents, and we don't always *receive* this from our parents. Church can fill in the gaps: In baptism, we are sealed by the Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever. God says to us, “I love you. You are mine.” No matter what mistakes we make, no matter what our achievements and failures might be, no matter what happens to us, we are safe, held always in God's love.

It's a little different from “go get 'em, team.” Or maybe we could say, it's a prelude that *prepares* us to “go get 'em” with a sense of adventure and learning and bravery.

You were hearing God's message of “I love you, you are mine” over and over long before I was called here. Pastor Elaine is good at many things, and one of the things she is best at is helping people feel loved, and safe, and held forever in the fierce and tender love of God. So in the midst of changes and the anxiety that comes with them, you already had that strong foundation and home base from your ministry with her. You already had that wisdom and courage. And you still do.

And it even started long before Pastor Elaine was called here. This is the heart of the gospel message that Martin Luther rediscovered in the Reformation: that nothing can separate us from the love of God, and we are held in God's strong love no matter what we do or don't do. And really of course it all started long before Luther: It's what Jesus was saying in his words of hope and assurance on the night of his arrest, in the Farewell Discourse, from which our gospel comes today. That hope and assurance come through especially in the promise of the Holy Spirit.

In this part of the Farewell Discourse, Jesus emphasizes the role of the Spirit as Advocate. In Greek the word is Paraclete, literally "one who comes alongside." In a trial, the one who comes alongside you is your advocate, so that's how it's translated here. Sometimes it is "comforter," or "counselor." Whatever you call it, the Paraclete's role is all about truth—a role he has in common with Jesus, who just in the last chapter has said he is "the way, the truth, and the life." Jesus has said that the Spirit will "remind" them of everything Jesus has said, thus answering the urgent question posted by Jesus' death and ascension: How will Jesus' revelation of God continue in his absence? The answer is that the Spirit will do what Jesus has done: show the *way* of love, proclaim the *truth* of love, and share the *life* of love. Whatever the future brings, Jesus will be with them through the Spirit, always coming alongside them no matter what.

This is the real good news that the church knows about change. It's not the caricature often associated with the church, that change can be avoided if you hold on tightly to the way you've always done things. The good news is that in any and all futures, including ones that are quite different than the past, the Spirit will come alongside us and do what Jesus has done. Through Christ grace and love abound, and they are everywhere and always. For all of our journeys, this means that "the call of God will never take you where the grace of God cannot keep you."

So we don't need to be intimidated by calls to follow Jesus into works of love for the sake of joy. God knows the world needs our love and work for justice and peace, in the Middle East, in our schools, in our governments. We can jump in with a sense of adventure and learning and bravery, praying for wisdom and courage: Because we know that no matter what, regardless of our achievements or failures, we are held forever in the fierce and tender love of God.

On that journey, the Spirit will be always alongside us, inviting us to discern Christ's presence. This is what we've done together these last four years. When you installed me as your $\frac{3}{4}$ -time pastor, you gave me a compass as, you said, "a sign of your calling to serve God and God's people...discerning the Spirit's movements in our lives and our congregation's life together." Today at the end of the service we have a ritual of farewell that kind of reverses the work of installation, as we set one another free for a new chapter. That ritual will be led by three of the congregational presidents and one of the vice presidents with whom I have had the great privilege of partnering. Along with many others, Neal, Kris, Ardie, and Pat have been at the helm of this congregation through much change over these four years, and they have done it with great wisdom and courage. Thank you—and thank you to *all* who have done the Spirit's work of accompanying and leading through change.

Now you *all* get to do the Spirit's work of reminding. In the days ahead, remind each other often how much you are loved, how you are held always in the fierce and tender love of God, and how much the world needs your love, in service for the sake of joy. Tell each other how it's okay to be anxious but in the end, it is all going to be okay because the call of God will never take you where the grace of God cannot keep you. At every possible opportunity, share in the meal in which Christ sustains you with his life, as you follow him along the way of love. Recall your baptisms, and see that cross on one another's brows, and on your own.

As you continue discerning the Spirit's movements in your lives and your congregation's life, you might need this. So I will return this compass to you when we say farewell, trusting that the strong foundation of God's fierce and tender love will stay with you and guide you along the way.

Whenever you can't find your own words for hope and reassurance, you can always find them in a hymn. Whatever else you do, keep singing together! There's a whole "Hope and Assurance" section in the hymnal. That's where I *finally* found the sermon hymn for today. This one has the same go-get-em tune, because God knows the world needs us to jump into works of love and justice with all we've got. But the words are one more reminder that we are held always in the fierce and tender love of God, and that the call of God will never take us where the grace of God cannot keep us. It's #618, "Guide me ever, great Redeemer."

The final blessing was written by William Sloane Coffin, an activist, Presbyterian pastor and American public theologian who died in 2006:

May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May God's face shine upon you with grace and mercy.

May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short;
grace to risk something big for something good;
grace to remember that the world is too dangerous
for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.

So, may God take your minds and think through them;
may God take your lips and speak through them;
may God take your hearts and set them on fire.