



Called out by Christ

John 20:19-23

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Washington Street UMC

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In 2006, Dr. Stanley Hauerwas, a well-known theologian out of Duke University, spoke at Ferrum College as part of the Buddy Wright Lecture Series. I was finishing my senior year at Ferrum, just a couple months shy of graduation. Hauerwas is recognized, if not for his contributions to the world of theological education, for his brass willingness to speak his mind no matter how colorful his language, or how upset the listener. He once said in a commencement address at a Mennonite University that he wasn't sure why anyone would waste their money paying for a four-year education at a Mennonite school; and he was serious.

As part of his lecture at Ferrum in 2006, Hauerwas made the bold claim, and I quote, "If the Methodist Church doesn't undergo some serious changes, the Methodist Church as we knew it will be dead in 10-years time." Perhaps he was just using hyperbole to make a point, as some eleven years later, the Methodist Church looks from the outside to be pretty much the same as we were ten years ago. Was Hauerwas wrong? Perhaps. But in truth, the Methodist Church, much like most other Christian Denominations in America, has faced significant loss over the past 50 years, and that trend still continues today.

Washington Street UMC is a not exempt of this trend. While worship attendance doesn't tell the full story of the vitality of a church, it offers a glimpse at the difference over time. In 1965, this church – in this Sanctuary – had over 500 people in worship each weekend. Washington Street was, for a time, the largest Methodist church in Northern Virginia.

Today, we have a vital and growing congregation – and for each of you and your participation in our mission of *Making a Place for Everyone*, I'm deeply thankful. I name the decline in our church not to look down on who we are today, but our trend over the past 50 years fits the trend of the denomination, and of the Christian church at large. So, picking on Hauerwas' warning, what has happened that such a bold warning even needs to be suggested?

Many a church scholar has offered an opinion regarding the decline in the church. Some suggest the Christian church reached a point in which we had so many people in the church, it took every bit of our focus just to care for those who were already here. We had no time or resources left to focus on the community. Others have suggested that a change in the American culture forced the church to isolate itself to maintain a hold of our Christian ideals. Still, others argue the church became too arrogant in its success, and in its proud state it became less appealing to the community. There are many suggestions as to the motivation, but the end result of each opinion is the same. Regardless of *why* we turned away from the world, the end result looks a lot like the disciples in the room following Jesus' crucifixion. The church universal seems to have mimicked the fear of the disciples, who holed themselves up into a locked room with the door shut to the world.

The disciples, in fear of what might happen to them following Christ's death, fearful of the repercussions they might face for having gone against the leaders of the Roman empire and the Jewish Temple, isolated themselves from the world. And that is perhaps our problem in the Christian Church. In fear we were losing the battle, or in fear of speaking out against the empirical government, our churches and our Christians became isolated, choosing to hunker down only with those we thought looked like us and talked like us and understood our Christian jargon.

The scripture tells us that the disciples were fortified in a shut room, or as some translations choose to interpret the Greek, they had locked themselves into a room. They were in fear of the Jews; they were in fear of those in the world around them. Yet, into this locked room, Jesus comes and stands among them. There is no indication Jesus walked through the door – he just appeared there among them.

Here are the disciples, huddled together, already in fear of what might come through the door. They are certainly fearful of who is outside the door. And yet, quite unexpectedly, Jesus comes and is standing among them – but they don't know it's him. They do not immediately recognize him to be Jesus. So, already in fear, their fear is now compounded as a man is standing in their midst. Knowing their fear, Jesus says, "Peace be with you." He proceeds to show them his hands and his side – and then they rejoiced *when they saw the Lord*. It took them a moment to even know it was Jesus; they had to see the scars. Once they recognize it is him, Jesus again says to them, "Peace be with you." He wants to alleviate the fear in the room, for what comes next doesn't allow for fear to be retained.

Having made himself known, having offered his peace, Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Having said these words, Christ breathes on them and says to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." The Greek word for Spirit is πνεῦμα (noo-ma), which quite literally means breath. The Spirit is like the breath of God, and Jesus breathes the breath on to them.

Get this image in your mind: the disciples are huddled together in fear, like lifeless vessels clustered in a locked room, scared of what they might face in the world outside. And here Christ comes, offering them peace in the midst of fear, and breathing into them new life with the gift of the Spirit. In an act that mimics the Creator in the Garden of Eden giving life to humanity, Christ breathes new life into the disciples empowering them with the gift of the Spirit. In both the Greek and the Hebrew, the word translated as breathed offers a meaning more like 'puffed.' "[It] carries with it the physical metaphor of puffing on a fire with bellows, or blowing on an ember to bring it from smoking and smoldering to brilliant fire, of intensifying a fire that had nearly gone out."ⁱ Christ comes in and breathes into the life of these scared and hiding disciples a fire that will lead them out into the streets, filled with the tongues of all nations, to share a witness to the great love of God which offers the forgiveness of sins.

"Into their entombment he enters. Their fear gives way to his peace. In them, his joy rises. His being sent lives in their being sent. His breath is now breathing in them. His bearing away the sin of the world will now be expressed in their bearing away of sin."ⁱⁱ

The work of Christ on that day 2000 years ago is the same work Christ seeks to offer in the world today. The Christian Church may have turned its focus inward to focus more on its own. We may focus our efforts, finances, and prayers around the discipleship of our own. We may have run from a culture we felt was attacking our beliefs, our thoughts, and our way of living. We may be hesitant to open the door to anyone who comes and knocks that doesn't look like or sound like us. We may hide our true thoughts and beliefs about Christ for fear of causing controversy with co-workers, family members, and neighbors next door. We may live a quiet life that seeks not to rock the boat, but to maintain pleasant relationships with others. But I assure you, "If a shut tomb cannot hold him in, a shut church cannot keep him out."ⁱⁱⁱ

The Church still lives today, even as it struggles from time to time, because the Church is not left to its own strength to maintain faithfulness. Christ breaks through the barriers we put up to isolate ourselves, and continues to breathe into us the Spirit of new life that calls us out into the world. Jesus doesn't breathe the Spirit into us to fortify our strength while hiding from the world – Christ breathes on us to give us the courage to go forth and follow Jesus' command. "The Spirit is not some kind of super hero sent to rescue us, but rather the one who equips, encourages, and stays with us, helping us perceive the needs of our neighbor's and community and then rise to the occasion to meet those needs with equal measures of tenacity, competence, and courage."^{iv}

We have work to do, both in our congregation, and in the Church at large, to offer discipleship and care to those who are here already in these walls. No question, the breath of the Spirit is not an invitation to leave anyone in the church behind. But let's be honest about what the gift of the Spirit is: the coming of the Spirit is what empowers us to live *out* the faith we have in a God who loves us so much that he sent Christ to teach us what faithful living looks like that when we received the power of God we may too go forth from these walls to live like that which we had been taught.

From the teaching example of Christ, and in the witness of the movement of the Spirit, "We have a purpose: to care for those around us as God cares for us, to make wherever we may find ourselves a better place [that it may be a glimpse of God's kingdom], to share God's love in word and deed that others may know they are not alone, and indeed, [to make sure others know] they are loved."^v

Pentecost is a birthday celebration of the Christian Church, but it's not simply a celebration of who we have been. The celebration of Pentecost is not simply a way to remember what happened in Jerusalem to a group of peasant fisherman and how from their witness came forth the creation of the Christian Church. We celebrate Pentecost as Christ's redemptive way to call us *back* to our mission, to re-instill in us the passion of being sent into the world to teach, preach, witness, and love as Christ did. Pentecost is about celebrating not just what God has done, but what God is still doing in the world today, and what God is leading us into tomorrow.

Pentecost is Christ's way of calling us out to get to work. It's Christ calling us out of our fear from what lies beyond those shut doors. It's Christ calling us out as he instills in us the peace of his presence. It's Christ calling us out to know that as we go forth, we do not go alone. It's Christ calling us out to remind us that people need to know there is freedom from the chains of the

evils of the world. It's Christ calling us out to a world that desperately needs to be reminded that God's love does win. It's Christ calling us out to a world clouded in fear and doubt to share the promise of the Light of truth. It's Christ calling us out to be a living witness that as a community with the power of God in the gift of the Spirit, we can create in our place a glimpse of God's kingdom – where everyone is welcome, where everyone belongs, where everyone learns, where everyone grows, where everyone is treated as children of God, and where everyone knows the love of God.

Here's the thing about Pentecost, here's the thing about the Power of God in the gift of the Spirit: when the Holy Spirit arrived on that first Pentecost day, did the disciples look around at each other and question *if* they should go out and speak the great love of God in such a way that everyone would understand? Did the disciples draw up a SWOT assessment on a white board to know what they should do next? Did the disciples run a capital campaign to start raising funds to build new church plants? Did the disciples question what God was going to do in their midst? No.

The power of the Spirit is an undeniable force. The movement of the Spirit is not meant to be debated. The leading of the Spirit is the gift of God, given by Christ as a breath of new life, that leads us from our huddled rooms of discipleship behind shut doors to go forth and to proclaim to all the world that we know the way to new life; we know the way to break forth from the chains of addiction and pain; we know how to find forgiveness for mistakes and failures; we know where to find healing for broken relationships and broken hearts; we know where to find peace in times of trouble; we know where to find comfort in times of fear; we know where to find a place of rest for the weary and the tired; we know where to find truth in a world of alternative facts; we know where to find promise in a time of doubt.

And the power of the Spirit doesn't ask us *if* we want to go forth and make a difference in the world by sharing the love of God to all. The power of the Spirit says, "*GO!*" Christ is calling you out by gifting you the power you need. Christ is saying, get out of here, and go forth to make disciples of all nations. You, Church, have been called out. You have been put on notice. May your life reflect your willingness to step up, to go forth, and to make a place for everyone to know the great love of God. And may our community reflect the witness of a people filled with the Spirit, releasing those in our world from the chains of sin and guilt. Because in a world where the Spirit leads, everyone hears, everyone understands, everyone knows the great love of our Lord. So go, empowered and strengthened by the one who calls us out. Go. Amen.

ⁱ Richard W. Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of John: A Storyteller's Commentary*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Paul Simpson Duke. *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Volume 2*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis & E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Duke.

^{iv} David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved May 31, 2017.

^v Lose.