

Sermon: Pentecost Sunday, May 15 2016, Acts 2 and John 14
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

There are times in the Christian year when I am particularly reminded that the community of faith that gathers within these four walls is but a tiny fraction of those who identify with the good news of Jesus Christ. One such day, is the day of Pentecost.

The story of the first Christian Pentecost, from the 2nd chapter of Acts, reminds us that the diverse, international, multi-lingual reality of the Church of Jesus Christ goes back to day one. From those beginnings, when the devout from all around the Mediterranean gathered in Jerusalem, there are now over two billion people in the world who identify themselves as Christian.

When Shannon and I were preparing for Ministry back in the mid-1980s, we had the great privilege of being overseas interns in the Philippines. For sixteen weeks in the summer of 1987, we were under the care of the Institute of Religion and Culture in Metro Manila, but our time was spent all over the Philippines, living with villagers and factory workers, and for the most part keeping our mouths shut and our eyes and ears open.

And in the spirit of Pentecost, most of what we heard was in a language unknown to us. While many people had English as a second language they had learned in school, there are roughly 175 different languages are spoken in the Philippines, with Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilocano and Ilonggo (Hiligaynon) spoken by at least 7 million people each, and ten more languages spoken by at least a million people each. The many tongues of Pentecost took on a new meaning in that place!

In looking for a structure for today's message, I decided to use the various images of the Holy Spirit found in the 14th chapter of John. In this gospel reading, Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit that was to come to the believers on that first Christian Pentecost gathering, using a term that can be translated in many ways: helper, friend, comforter, counselor or advocate, teacher and reminder. These, then, are the words which will guide our exploration of the Philippines, and Pentecost, and the active power of Christ in the world.

We start with an understanding of the Spirit as the one who Teaches.

The Philippines, when we were there, was roughly 90% Christian, and about 90% of that segment was Roman Catholic. Much of the Church, and its theology, still closely resembled the 16th century Spanish Catholicism: very top-down, very guilt-oriented. So imagine how revolutionary it would be to bring common people together, and ask them "where do you see God active in your life?" and the initial response was one of disbelief: God? Active? In MY life?

As had happened a decade earlier in Latin America, much work was being done in the Philippines in the area of "people's theology" or "popular theology," bringing the Bible into the countryside and saying, "where do you see yourself in this?" It was such an outstanding, empowering energy to be around as the Church transitioned from authoritarian to truly listening. The Church stopped understanding itself as teacher, and started understanding the people in the countryside as the teachers.

Unlike Latin America, with its Theology of Liberation, a somewhat different theology was emerging as the "popular theology" was being gathered. Local theologians like Luna Dingayan were formulating what they called a Theology of Struggle, stating that when we struggle against oppression, and when we act in solidarity with others who struggle, we never do it alone; it is with the Spirit and presence of Christ. This theology also accepted that the struggles of today may not immediately bear fruit, but the process of struggle is both holy and worthy, and is to be engaged for the sake of future generations no matter what the cost.

The Holy Spirit may also be understood in two words from the courtroom: the Advocate or Counselor who seeks the best on our behalf.

It would be a mistake to idealize the Church in the Philippines or any other nation, assuming that every Church and every Church leader is deeply engaged in the struggles. There were big, comfortable Churches serving the needs of the wealthy; there were local, justice-oriented Churches and Churches planted by American fundamentalist preachers, focusing on the avoidance of sin and the goal of prosperity.

There were, however, countless amazing Christian communities, with very different approaches to serving others and serving Christ. Manila's infamous garbage dump, Smoky Mountain, had tens of thousands of people living on it and near it. Yes, it smelled like garbage, and it was warm, stinky steam rising from it all the time. And as people eked out a living from retrieving recyclable goods and other valuables from the mounds of trash, the Church was there, ministering to their needs, providing community and comfort and access to health services.

A very different, but equally courageous approach was offered by the National Federation of Sugar Workers, which was kind of an amalgam between a Union and a Christian Solidarity movement. We were able to travel to different sugar haciendas and saw the startling contrast between life on a hacienda that had been formally organized – and life on a hacienda where the unionizers had been chased away. Most startling was the difference between the children: the bright-eyed vitality in one place, compared to the racking cough and cloudy eyes at the other. Similar efforts were being made in the sweat-shops of the Bataan Export Processing Zone, where improved housing, education and healthcare were being extended to factory workers. While it was nearly impossible to get past the various Free Trade agreements in order to formally organize the workers, Christian activists were doing what they could.

In being present to the poorest of the poor, and working for change, the gospel of Jesus Christ was being served. The ministry of presence and the ministry of activism were two very different approaches, and both engaged “the common good” in their own way.

The Holy Spirit both comforts us, and reminds us of where we must draw the line.

While the comfort given by the Holy Spirit is the consolation we receive from God in our times of challenge or loss, the pursuit of “comfort” is a strong motivator pretty much anywhere you go in the world. And it was no different in the Philippines. Wherever we went, there was a huge and totally understandable desire to ascend out of the peasant class and into a modestly comfortable middle-class life.

What was very different from life in Canada, was how high the cost could be in trying to make that ascent. One of the most heartbreaking stories we encountered was at the area surrounding the Pagsanjan Falls tourist district. With such a beautiful place – made recognizable world-wide after the movie *Apocalypse Now* was filmed there – came the seedy side of tourism, and by the time we got there, the easiest and most predictable way for families to make the leap from living in a shack to living in a nice home, was through a thriving sex tourism industry. In exchange for annual sexual rendezvous with the children, foreign men would build nice homes for the families, and pay for the children to go to College.

As abhorrent as that sounds, when that's the only way to emerge from poverty, families found all kinds of ways to justify it and it became really hard for their neighbours to not follow suit. So the Church, when we were there, was definitely reminding people of boundaries that should not be crossed, no matter what the benefit, but also worked hard at diversifying the economy so that families had some reasonable options for achieving a better life. Families were given the funds to raise ducks, or prawns, or other foodstuffs, by no-interest loans from Christian organizations. They were also trying to work with international law enforcement agencies to charge and arrest the Men who were paying to have sex with children, but the frontline work was to give families some options.

In other parts of the country, the Church was doing what it could to raise the standard of living. One parish priest we met, in particular, spent much of his week helping the people of his village to run a bakery, using coconut shells as the fuel to fire up the ovens. It may not sound like a big deal, but it was so practical, and had the Spirit of Christ written all over it.

The Holy Spirit is our Friend or helper, the one who stands beside us.

Before the summer of '87 I had not realized that the Philippines had aboriginal peoples, but indeed they do. One of their first nations, the Mangyan people, lived on the Island of Mindoro, and were under constant siege by foreign economic interests, and by the prejudice of locals.

The Mangyans, traditionally, were fisher-folk who did a bit of farming on the side. But in recent decades, their fishing grounds had been taken over by huge Japanese trawlers – and they were forced off their farmland because of disputes over title – so that eventually, all they had left was living up in the mountains. So what did they do?

They had some tests run on the local ore, and found enough silver to be worth mining. So they set up an old-style sluice, which wasn't going to make them rich, but it gave them back a sense of pride and purpose and sovereignty over their land. And funding their start-up, and supporting it spiritually and practical, was the Church.

One of the most memorable talks of my life was with Pastor Rey Aldaba, who told me that even though the Mangyans kept getting moved to poorer and poorer land, they and he were still under threat. He personally had been threatened to leave or die. In response to this threat, Rey's belief was this: "I already gave my life to Christ – so nobody else can take it away from me." And with that, he kept on loving, and supporting, and encouraging this resilient group of first nation Filipinos.

The Holy Spirit continues to act

Needless to say, though many years have passed, the summer in the Philippines made a profound impact on us. Scarcely a week goes by that something we hear or see does not remind us of our time on these beautiful Islands, most especially the reality that in much of the world, the big issues are really big.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit enabled the international community to hear what was being said by people of a completely different nationality. My prayer for the United Church of Canada, as we seek our way forward in tenuous times, is that we will still have ears attuned to what is being said by the rest of the world – by Filipinos, by the African Churches, by Latin American voices, by Indigenous people everywhere. The needs expressed by these voices are great but so is the sense that Christ is present in the midst of their struggle. May we be emboldened and inspired, by their call to join with them in faithful solidarity, and by their profound faith. In the name of the Spirit, our life-breath and guide, Amen.

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