

**“Know this for Certain: You Must be Born Anew”**

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew’s United Church  
on May 20, 2018 at 10:30 a.m. (Pentecost)

Scripture Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Romans 8:22-25

(The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

If you were like a billion people in the world yesterday, you awoke to the coverage of the wedding between Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, or the present Duke and Duchess of Sussex. You heard the debate about what colour of dress would the Queen wear, and how plain or flowery would be the dress of the bride; you knew the speculation as to whether or not Harry would wear his beard, and where and when the first public kiss would be delivered.

The usual debate about these things was a reflection of how big a deal this wedding event was for many, so forgive me if I was more excited about taking an array of mainly empty paint cans to the Hazardous Waste depot on Frobisher early in the morning yesterday instead of awaiting the end of the wedding. It seemed to be a more exciting activity in my life.

This experience reminded me of the time I invited a single mother and her daughter to use a couple of baseball tickets I had for the Toronto Blue Jays, but due to a funeral could not use them. Mom was an active part of the congregation I then served, and always a supportive, direct commentator on life in general and the church in particular. I did not know if they had many opportunities to get to a baseball game, and I wanted to share that wonderful opportunity with them, so I was a bit surprised by the clarity of the Mom’s response when offered the baseball game tickets: “No thank you – we would rather sit on our front porch and watch the grass grow in our yard than attend a baseball game.”

So here I am – saying I would rather deal with Hazardous Waste than watch a royal wedding.

Well, that is only partially true.

You see, to make sure I was at the front of the line when the Hazardous Waste facility opened, I left the wedding procedures halfway through the sermon of the Bishop Michael Curry.

I expect Curry was an unknown individual to you before he delivered the message yesterday shortly after noon in Windsor, England. I certainly did not know him. And commentators said he provided the passion and excitement to the day that was missing in the rest of the ceremony. It was nice to see his flare and enthusiasm, not to mention his allusions to Martin Luther King Jr. and the traditions of his own American style of worship, an echo of the bride easily lost in the pompous ceremony of a royal event.

Before Bishop Curry took the pulpit (not knowing he was to be a part of the ceremony) I had thought: “This is a solemn occasion in a cathedral setting – surely someone in the

opening could have provided a bit of life to the traditional rite that was being played out before us.”

But I focus on Bishop Curry because he, more than anyone else, provided the Pentecostal spirit of the event broadcast throughout the world yesterday. He did two things – he provided passion and energy to an event of formality and tradition, and he reminded us of the cultural tradition out of which the bride has come.

We are here for Pentecost Sunday – a day when the church began, when people felt the spirit was surrounding them and calling them into new life, and a time when people of the early church began to think of themselves as just that – a community where faith is real, hope is secure, and the Spirit is alive and present for us all.

If the Spirit is here, then we cannot expect life to be the same as it always has been. The Spirit brings energy and hope, the Spirit brings vitality and new life, the Spirit transforms us in ways that are beyond our imagination.

Now we might say “Why can’t we simply create that sense of newness of life and renewed energy whenever we want to?”

There is a hint of how challenging that can be in Paul’s letter to the Romans within the passage read this morning. In the Living Bible we read:

“We are saved by trusting. And trusting means looking forward to getting something we don’t yet have...”

Pentecost comes alive, and we are transformed, when we are open to something we do not yet have, and are unsure what it may be.

There are many Pentecostal movements within the history of the church, and what Paul is really telling us, contrary to what is proclaimed and understood by many religious people, is, “If we know fully what the power of the Spirit is for us, and we can determine who is filled with the Spirit and who is not, then the truth is we have no idea what the power of the Spirit is.”

Let me say this again, for it is a truth that I have never perceived or understood in this way before, and as one who has unabashedly shared Paul’s teachings in my career, preached on his many letters often, defend him against attacks of being a misogynist, and seen Romans as a book of promise as much or more than a book of legal insights, I myself was amazed by the truth of what I just said, inspired by Paul’s own observations: “If we know fully what the Spirit is for us, and we can determine who is filled with the Spirit and who is not, then the truth is we have no idea what the power of the Spirit is.”

The Spirit is about change. How do we put ourselves in a position to be changed and transformed? Dr. Jeffrey Kottler, writing in *Psychology Today* a few years back, suggests that if we are looking for greater meaning in our life, what we need to do is “reach out to others who are neglected, oppressed, abused, or marginalized – those most in need.” He

says that when we start to put the focus on others, and not ourselves, we begin to experience the benefits of doing something good.

On that basis, the Pentecostal spirit is in the life of Kendall Ciesemier, a young woman who was born in Wheaton, Illinois and grew up with her supportive parents. One day in 2003 she was watching the Oprah Winfrey show and learned about older brothers and sisters taking care of their siblings because both parents had AIDS.

She was amazed at that situation. She knew how hard her own parents worked to care for her, for she was suffering from a rare liver disease, and she could not imagine caring for siblings without her parents' help, much less coping within her own life.

She went on line to learn about AIDS in Africa, and ended up sponsoring a child for the year, using \$360 of her birthday and Christmas money she had saved.

The following summer she was scheduled for a liver transplant, so instead of receiving gifts during her stay in hospital, she asked people to give money to help a whole community in Zambia. Her goal was \$60,000, and by the end of the summer, she had raised \$15,000, so she kept up her fundraising efforts, and her agency Kids Caring 4 Kids was born.

One of the things that Kendall has done through her charity is develop "I Care 2" kits that help show children and youth how they might raise money themselves for worthwhile efforts.

The philosophy of Kids Caring 4 Kids echoes the insights of Dr. Kottler. Even though she faced her own health challenges (and still does as a University student) Kendall Ciesemier realized that the spirit is alive when we look beyond what we are facing ourselves and find meaning in doing just that.

That brings me back to Bishop Curry from yesterday's wedding. I said he did two things – he brought energy and passion to the ceremony, and he shared in presenting a cultural norm that is part of the American style of worship that may be foreign, or at least not as regular, in the British religious tradition.

But Bishop Curry did two other things that were dramatic and even more Pentecostal in their impact on his presentation and the wedding event. First off, he rose beyond the judgment and fear of his own ancestors. It was reported that both of his parents were descendants from slaves, and so his tradition is one of being abused, ruled, dismissed, silenced, and living in poverty and squalor.

Bishop Curry, in his family, was given the tools to rise above that life to be educated, to become articulate, to speak as one with authority, to be a person who came from those who felt like life was a valley of dry bones, but through the spirit of hope and perseverance found new life and new hope. That just does not happen – it takes a transforming spiritual presence to make that a reality.

But that is the first part of the Pentecostal experience of Bishop Curry and many in the Black religious traditions of the southern USA. The rousing sermons of southern black

preachers are legendary. Yesterday, however, Bishop Curry, having found his voice years ago through being filled by the Spirit, having refused to defer authority to others except God, and having determined he was an equal to anyone there in Windsor Cathedral, voluntarily chose to offer a message that was refined, respectful, insightful, and gentle.

He was there as an American, given a voice within the bastion of royal power and privilege, and had an opportunity to say whatever he wanted to say, and do it in his terms. I can say (having been blessed to be in the presence of some great American black preachers) that Bishop Curry's address may have seemed energetic and passionate in yesterday's ceremony, but it was tame and restrained for a traditional black preacher.

You see, Pentecost is about the need to change, and we are always changing, and in one sermon Bishop Curry showed that he had to change as a descendant from slaves in order to get his voice as a religious leader and preacher, to rise up in affirmation and in truth-telling, and yet as a religious leader and preacher he also needed to show restraint in order to make sure his message could be heard in the tradition of people gathered in an aged British Cathedral.

Bishop Curry could have said whatever he wanted to say, and in his own terms, but he knew that people will only hear his message if he delivered it in a way consistent with the context and location of the wedding. The Spirit works best for those who have eyes opened, and ears ready to hear. Bishop Curry knew that, and delivered a message to show that he had seen, and had heard, how the spirit works in this setting as well as in other settings.

Life has its complications. We are always learning as to how we can live, and what we should do. Sometimes we need to find our voice so that our truth can be shared; sometimes we might need to temper our voice so that our truth may be heard. Both are Pentecostal moments.

I return to the basic insight I offered earlier: "If we know fully what the power of the Spirit is for us, and we can determine who is filled with the Spirit and who is not, then the truth is we have no idea what the power of the Spirit is."

Pentecost is based on trust, says Paul, and when we live in situations of sharing trust with others, we hear what they offer with open ears and discerning minds, and we then can fully understand where God calls us to change, to be transformed, and to be able to live our lives with authenticity and with integrity.

We can do all of that when we are open to the Spirit, for no matter where we are or what we face, our lives will be changed often, and we simply need to be clear that the change on which we embark is healthy, wholesome, and life giving for us and for others.