

Pentecost message, 2021

Bible reading: Isaiah 61:1-4; Luke 4:16-21, Acts 4:32-5:11

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We have a housing problem in our part of the world. There is not enough good, safe, affordable housing to go around. The spike in housing prices in Toronto, Vancouver, Victoria, closer to home at Sproat Lake or even in town seems to climb ever higher. You wonder where it finally stops. If you are homeowner, it's kind of exciting to think that your house is worth half a million or way more. But you might wonder how a 25-year-old with some student debt, or still mired in an entry level job with an entry level income is ever going to come up with a 20% down payment on an ordinary \$400,000 house – or more likely, \$400,000 tiny condo. And if they ever scrap together a down payment, how will they make monthly mortgage payments? You might wonder how a single parent with two kids can afford rent on a half decent two-bedroom suite without working two jobs and then trying to find time to be a parent. You might wonder how someone can ever get off the street or away from sharing with two or three others one of the RV trailers without adequate hook-ups on the land next to the ghetto on 4th Ave. How do you get your life together when you can't get a decent night's sleep, when you can't cook a decent meal?

You might also wonder what this has to do with Pentecost. Why is this a problem for Pentecost? After all, the Bible tells us what happened on this day.

The Holy Spirit arrived and the apostles were able to speak about Jesus to people from all over the Mediterranean who were in town for the festival. They all heard the disciples speaking in their own language. That was a miracle. The word of God was preached miraculously! We might even think of the story of the Tower of Babel. People wanted to build this massive tower, a monument to their own greatness and stability. It would reach into heaven so they could go up and be on a level with God. It didn't work. God scrambled their languages and they couldn't understand each other. They gave up on the tower and scattered over the face of the earth. But they came back together in the Holy Spirit. Now *that* is a Pentecost story.

We know that the Holy Spirit arrived and words from the prophet Joel came true. God poured out his spirit on all people. Sons and daughter were able to prophesy. Young men saw visions and old men who once thought their tale was told out began once again to dream dreams. They had a future. Peter preached about Jesus and explained how all scripture points to him. Just like the prophet Jeremiah had said, everyone, from the least to the greatest will know God. Three thousand people in the crowd were filled with the Spirit and understood and repented and were added to the number of believers. *That's* a Pentecost story.

The arrival of the Holy Spirit meant that apostles could carry on the work of Jesus. With previously unimagined courage, they spoke the word of God even when it landed them in jail. They were able to continue the miracles that Jesus had done. In those first chapters after the Pentecost story, we can read that the Holy Spirit was at work, healing people through Peter's words – through his shadow! People were healed; the Kingdom of God was breaking in. *That's* a Pentecost story.

The Holy Spirit also affected the real estate market. The Spirit infiltrated economics. Just three verses after telling us all about the new believers and still very much on the topic of the Holy Spirit's arrival, Luke tells us that all the believers were together and held everything in common. That's Acts 2:44. The wave of change swept into economics. One full chapter later, in chapter 4 from which we

read, Luke gets much more specific. A man named Barnabas sold land, brought the proceeds to the church which redistributed the income among those who needed help. The Holy Spirit was continuing to shape the church into the body it is made to be. The story of Barnabas becomes a model of how the church can work. We shouldn't be too surprised that Luke would point out the Holy Spirit's impact on real estate and economics. He has pointed this direction before. Luke is not a Marxist, not a socialist, not a communist. He *is* enough of a realist to know there is a good chance that wherever our treasure is, our hearts won't be far behind. Only Luke gives us the song of Mary, singing about how the poor will be fed and the rich turned away empty handed. In Luke, Jesus' first sermon announces good news for the poor and the year of Jubilee, which, among other things, includes a great economic redistribution, a leveling of the playing field for those who had been running uphill all their lives. Luke includes Jesus' parables about debtors, about a Good Samaritan, about a Rich Fool, about the Rich Man and Lazarus. All but one of these are unique to Luke. For Luke, wealth is not a sign of divine approval, but danger. He recounts Jesus' words, "How hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." The Holy Spirit infiltrated economics and set about changing a housing market.

Of course, the question of what this means *today* comes with an important qualifier. The Holy Spirit prompted believers in first century Jerusalem to hold things in common and occasionally sell of some property and share the proceeds.

There was no command.

They didn't have to.

Same is true today. There is no command that says Christians today must start selling off their holdings and share the wealth. Ananias and Sapphira met a terrible end but it wasn't because they held back some of the sale price of their land. They met a terrible end because they lied about it. They said to the apostles, "Here is all the money. We are all in. We totally trust God and as a sign of our total trust, we're handing over everything." But they didn't give everything. They didn't totally trust and even that was not the problem. They lied about it. It could have been avoided. They weren't obligated to give everything. We aren't either. But we can't read these first chapters of Acts without noticing the economic implications of Pentecost.

Noticing the economic implications can make things a little awkward. It's funny because in our world, we can find all kinds of ways to flaunt wealth but it's still impolite, *gauche*, to talk about it. We need to think about why it's awkward. It might be so because we have some innate sense of the risks involved with money. We know that money can prevent or solve a lot of problems. Money can make parts of life easier. It can also give rise to much self deceit, allowing us to think we are secure. The old reformation preacher Martin Luther knew 500 years ago that security is the ultimate idol. We hold to anything that will offer protection, comfort, safety. Enough money can buy us a piece of immortality if we get an endowed teaching chair at a university named after us. Enough money can buy a nice piece of security for our children, especially in a time when we don't know how they can ever get into a red-hot housing market. The human race, and maybe our time and our place more than any other, has shown that we are willing to exchange anything – our family, our health, our church, the truth – for a taste of security. This self-securing mentality is at the heart of all failures to live by faith in God.

So, awkward or not, a conversation about real estate and money is appropriate for Pentecost. The response of those early believers in Jerusalem may not be ours. There are other possible responses. Let me offer a few wild suggestions. They may not work. Hopefully, they can be enough to get us thinking. And then doing - *something*.

- For most of the year, Jessica and I could easily make do with half the house we have. Should we – and more of us – be thinking about a suite in the basement? I resist this idea before I even think about zoning laws or legal suites or renovation costs. I just don't want to share my house. I don't want the noises, smells, extra cars and people hanging around my house. But on some important level, it's not my house. My privacy and comfort are not the things that will ultimately make me happy.
- Like a lot of you, I have some money saved, not enough to buy a rental property. I don't have the skills to maintain it well on my own. Should some of us think about a partnership in which we don't have to lose money, but the primary goal would be to provide some decent housing?
- How about our new kitchen downstairs? I sent an exploratory email to ACAWS (Alberni Community and Women's Society Services) asking if they could benefit from occasional access to the kitchen. Could we teach some basic cooking and healthy diet skills there? Could we open the door for someone else to teach those skills?
- In the news you might hear a story about government action taken to discourage market speculators or absentee owners that chase up the price of real estate. We hear about renovations, the process of a landlord evicting tenants so they can improve their property and charge a lot more. I don't know enough about all of that to speak with authority. I will not assume that landlords are always greedy and tenants are victims. But some of us could do well to become informed and write letters, make some calls and do what we can to shape good laws for landlords and tenants.
- We can certainly pray. Lord help us to discern your ways in the world around us. Open our eyes to see where the Holy Spirit is leading us. And thank you for the great privilege of joining into them.

We have a housing problem in our part of the world. The Pentecost story, as it unfolds through the stories that follow the moment in the upper room, tells us that the Holy Spirit makes a housing matter a spiritual matter.

It's not my job to tell you precisely what you need to do. In these matters, I can't even say that I am leading the field in any courageous way.

But the Pentecost story, not me, tells us that the Holy Spirit seeks to transform material things, change the way we do business, change the way we value and use money and property. Not only that, in and through this call, the Holy Spirit summons us to a life that is finally worth living, a life that is secure in the ways that really count.

And now we pray – this is a poem called "A Landed Prayer" by John Terpstra.