

“Called to the Vocation of Love” – Bishop Lanette Plambeck

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The United Methodist Church forms disciples of Jesus Christ, who empowered by the Holy Spirit, love boldly, serve joyfully and lead courageously in local communities and worldwide connections.

1st John 4 (New International Version)

¹ Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

⁴ You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵ They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

¹³ This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. ¹⁶ And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷ This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹ And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

Siblings in Christ. It is Pentecost and we find ourselves returning to the Upper Room. There was a sound like the rush of a violent wind. There was fire dividing and descending, resting on each of them. There were words spoken in every language under Heaven and beneath it all, whether they knew it or not. There was love. Love poured out. Love made bold. Love that cast out fear.

Beloveds, hear me well: Pentecost is not the culmination of the Spirit's movement. It's an inaugural moment. It is not about disciples hunkered down in a posture of fear. They had gathered in obedience, in spiritual retreat — waiting, wanting, longing, expecting. And what they experienced was a holy launch, a great awakening, a movement of empowerment. They experienced the Spirit leading by eliminating barriers. The Spirit led by breaking down division and extending grace and gift to all who gathered.

And yes, the Spirit continues to come in wind and flame. The Spirit comes to break us open; to break us out of silence and into witness; to break us out from tolerating that what should be intolerable; to engage in acts of justice, advocacy, compassion, and redemption; to break us out of patterns that have divorced us from evangelism, faith formation, outreach, and revival. The Spirit is pushing us, propelling us, pleading with us to engage our mission and our mission field to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

And friends, hold onto this faith fact: the Spirit comes to break us out of flirtation with the promises of this world — a flirtation with Christian nationalism, a flirtation with power, with privilege, and with the hijacking of the Gospel. The Spirit is calling all of us into this God-breathed movement called the United Methodist Church — a movement that is nothing less than a calling into the vocation of love. So let's begin where Pentecost always begins — with the truth. Frederick Buechner once said, “The truth is always that which burns, but it is also that which heals.”

Friends, we are living in a time when lies wear the garments of religion and fear masquerades as wisdom. We are watching political leaders — some claiming the name of Christ — promote agendas of exclusion, supremacy, and state-sanctioned cruelty.

But the writer of 1st John doesn't mince words writing, *“Every spirit that does not confess Jesus Christ come in the flesh is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist.”* (1 John 4:3) To be clear, these words aren't about fearmongering. It's not about a fear-based theology. These words are calling us into discernment. Discernment that pays attention to when systems of power deny the image of God in others, when the Gospel is twisted to prop up empire — that is antichrist.

And here's the miracle of Pentecost — the Spirit does not come to pacify us. The Spirit comes to ignite us. Are we ready to be ignited? The Spirit doesn't call us to hush up, but the Spirit gives us tongues of fire and voices of truth.

Thomas Kelly, a Quaker mystic, spoke of a divine center deep within us all he wrote, “There is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul — a holy place, a Divine Center.” It is as if within each of us there is an inner upper room, a holy centering space deep within our very souls, calling us into the vows of our baptism, reigniting us as people of wind and flame.

And friends, when the Spirit fell at Pentecost, it didn't fall to make the disciples safe. It made them brave. The Spirit pushed them out to speak the language of love into the world, to form community across cultures and classes and any division. The Spirit pushed them out to become the church, not as an institution, but as a living, breathing movement of love. And we, you and I, we are called into that same risk — to root ourselves in God and to let love lead us out.

Eugene Peterson described discipleship — speaking of being let out in love — as “a long obedience in the same direction.” That is getting alongside of Jesus and the Jesus movement to follow where he leads us. And that direction, Friends, is the direction of active love. Not a passive love, but a fierce, durable, justice-seeking, bold love.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said it this way, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” So, if this love arc bends toward justice, then the Spirit calls us to follow the arc, to bend with it, to walk the long road of change, to keep speaking the language of justice when others grow tired. This arc of love does not bend by magic. It bends because Spirit-

filled, love-committed people pull it with their voices, with their lives, with their Pentecost fire, that inner sanctuary being lived out into the world.

And friends, let's go deeper here. I want to be clear that the word antichrist makes some of us uncomfortable. Does that word make us uncomfortable? It should, I think a little bit, because it points out that there are times that even we can engage in work or activity that is anti to what Jesus calls us to be and do.

We've seen a movement that is a distorted movement, that is a fear-driven theology and an end-time conspiracy. And we need to recover the Gospel message and what the Christ message is — this bold love message is — in the world. Because it is not about the end of all time — it's about gaining clarity in our time. First John says, *“Even now, many antichrists have come...They went out from us but did not belong to us.”* (1 John 2:18-19)

So hear me clearly: antichrist is not just a person—it is a spirit. It's a system. It's a theology. It's a way of leaning and leading in this world. And it is a distortion of the Gospel that claims Christ but denies Christ's way. And why does this matter? It matters because we live in a time when the name of Jesus is used to promote what is opposite to his very ministry — scapegoating the vulnerable, idolizing power, elevating nationalism over the kingdom of God, preaching fear more than love, replacing mercy with control.

And how do we know what is of Christ? We look to the Gospel, to the person of Jesus. Does what we see look like Jesus who welcomed the sinners and ate with the outcast? Does what we hear sound like the one who healed the broken and blessed the peacemakers? Does what we see again reflect the Christ who chose the cross, not coercion? Does it feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and those in prison? Does it care for the least of these? Do we care for the least of these? Is what we see happening in our land and around the world reflect the lamb of God? Or do we see wolves cloaked in sheep's skin?

To be clear, what I am saying is not merely my opinion. I'm proclaiming the words of the Gospel, the words written in red. If you want to know if something is of Jesus, friends, don't rely on another to define that for you. Get into the book and allow that living Pentecost spirit to, through wind and fire and Word, to liberate you on what is spoken, what is written in the Word. Because what is of Christ indeed liberates. What is of Christ dignifies. What is of Christ bends toward justice, toward mercy, and toward truth. When what we see is not of Christ,

when what we see is not empowered by the Holy Spirit, friends, as people of Pentecost, we must name it. We must confront it. And we do not bless it in Christ's name. Because when false Christs flourish, the real Christ becomes unrecognizable. And we, friends, we are Pentecost people, and we must make Jesus visible again.

So, what do we do now? Well, you and I, we look for evidence. Evidence in ourselves and in others. In the Bible, Spirit-based evidence is called Fruit of the Spirit. This fruit refers to the nine characteristics that result from the Holy Spirit working in a Christian's life. As described in Galatians chapter five, these qualities are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

And as Pentecost people, we receive the wind even when it unsettles us. We bear the fire even if it costs us. And we speak the truth in bold love, even when our voices shake. And we commit ourselves, in this tradition in the United Methodist Church, as Christ followers in the Wesleyan tradition. Not just for this moment or a moment, but we commit ourselves for a lifetime. Because friends, the Spirit has come and that Spirit is love. And that Spirit is a fire that still burns.

So church, raise your hallelujah! Be the fire that loves boldly, serves joyfully, and leads courageously. This is Pentecost and the world is waiting for us. And friends, God is depending on us to speak truth, to seek justice, to live out mercy, and to walk alongside God in a posture of humility. God is calling us to embrace the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. The God that we know and who knows us to the very core of who we are, our God has called us for such a time as this.

Hallelujah! Amen.