

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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## Tearing Down the Fences

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Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and from Jesus Christ, through whom the Holy Spirit is poured out without measure. Amen.

We are people who love fences. Not just wooden fences marking property lines. Not just chain-link fences around institutions. But the invisible fences through our minds, bodies, and communities; lines we draw to decide who belongs and who doesn't; who is "in" or "out"; who is "safe" or "suspect"; who is "normal" or "a problem."

The reality is, fences are never neutral. They influence not only our society but also our spiritual and theological lives. By establishing boundaries, we do more than organize communities; we attempt to manage grace, decide who receives mercy, and determine who belongs.

Fences end up shaping our world. Current events reveal hardening borders and targeted bodies: immigrants are discarded, families are separated, and individuals are detained and deported. Legislative boundaries isolate and endanger transgender individuals, establish registries, restrict public life, and increase surveillance and punishment of neighbors.

This is what the powers do, what empires do. They survive by dividing people into categories: citizen and outsider, clean and unclean, legal and illegal, "real" and "not real." Empires preach a gospel of scarcity: *There isn't enough dignity to go around. There isn't enough safety. There isn't enough belonging.* So somebody has to be excluded.

Pentecost challenges our tendency to construct boundaries around God by determining who is worthy, included, able to lead, or blessed. The Holy Spirit breaks down these barriers and resists our efforts to contain its movement.

The Spirit does not seek our permission, does not acknowledge our borders, and does not wait for established procedures. The Spirit dismantles fences. This theme emerges in the reading from Numbers, which offers a scene that feels almost funny, until we realize it's about us.

Moses gathers the elders, leaders, and those considered legitimate. There's a tent, an official moment, and a structure. The Spirit comes, rests on the elders, and they prophesy.

But then something happens that disrupts the system: two men, Eldad and Medad, are not at the tent. They're outside the official gathering. They are in the camp. And the Spirit falls on them anyway. And they begin to prophesy anyway.

Which means God is doing a God-thing *outside* the approved space, outside the sanctioned moment, outside the institutional control. And Joshua panics. "My lord Moses, stop them!"

Stop them. Not because they're preaching hate. Not because they're abusing power. Not because they're hurting anyone. Stop them because they are *unauthorized*.

Joshua represents the anxious voice of institutional reflex: if an event was not planned, it cannot be from God; if it does not occur in the designated place, it cannot be the Spirit; if it is not performed by the approved individuals, *it must be dangerous*. The church, if we are honest, has often embodied this perspective; retreating in fear, seeking control, and remaining wary of what is not understood.

We have created dogmas and purity tests. We have invented hoops to jump through, requirements for participation that we call "tradition." We have confused our preferences with God's will, we've confused our comfort with holiness, and our control with faithfulness.

We treat grace like it's a limited resource, fiercely guarded, cautiously distributed, anxiously rationed. When God bursts into unexpected places, calls people we never imagined, or speaks with voices we don't trust, Joshua rises in us and pleads: "Stop them."

But Moses responds with one of the most liberating lines in Scripture: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" In other words: *Joshua, why are you protecting*

*me? Why are you protecting the institution? Why are you acting like God is ours to manage?*

Moses refuses to police the Spirit. Moses refuses to build a fence around God's grace. Moses dreams of a world where the Spirit rests on *all* God's people. And Pentecost is God saying: "Yes. That is the world I'm making."

This narrative continues in Acts, where the Spirit does not arrive in a conventional manner. Instead, the Spirit comes as wind and fire, reminiscent of creation's beginning. It is poured out upon those without power in the empire, authority in the temple, or credentials in the courts. The Spirit grants them language, not for domination, but for connection; not to erase differences, but to foster mutual understanding.

And Peter quotes Joel: "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh." Not some flesh. Not the respectable flesh. Not the documented flesh. Not the straight flesh. Not the cisgender flesh. Not the wealthy flesh. Not the housed flesh. Not the powerful flesh. **All flesh.**

Pentecost reveals God's opposition to our fences; and each time we try to limit God, God tears down those boundaries to be with those excluded. This is the heart of God and the Gospel.

God does not remain behind our fences or borders. God appears at the margins and moves toward those whom the empire seeks to erase. The true test for the church is not its ability to defend boundaries with scripture, but whether it can recognize the Spirit when it manifests beyond established confines.

The Epistle appointed for today from 1 Corinthians 12 takes us deeper. Paul writes, "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit... in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." Notice what Paul does and does not say. He does not say: "There are varieties of gifts, so let's pick the best ones and ignore the rest." Nor does he say, "There are varieties of gifts, so everyone should become the same." Rather, Paul says the Spirit creates diversity intentionally and then binds it into one body.

The empire uses fences to isolate and divide. The empire says: *Your survival depends on being separate. Your safety depends on someone else being excluded.*

But the Spirit says something else: *Your survival is bound up with your neighbor's survival. Your freedom is bound up with your neighbor's freedom. Your dignity is bound up with your neighbor's dignity.*

This is not a model of “power-over,” in which one person must be diminished for another to feel secure. Instead, it is “power-with”: shared life, shared breath, and shared liberation. It is a community where gifts are not used as weapons, but as resources for mutual flourishing.

And that means we must learn to celebrate the “unofficial” places God is working:

- in protests where people risk their bodies for their neighbors
- in mutual aid networks, feeding families and paying rent
- in shelters and encampments where people keep one another alive
- in queer and trans communities that practice chosen family and fierce care
- in immigrant communities whose courage exposes the empire's cruelty

The Spirit is not limited to church property. The Spirit is not bound to budgets. The Spirit does not require our permission slips. The church is not the owner of the Spirit. The church is the people trying to catch up to where the Spirit already is.

On Pentecost, the message is clear: Reject Joshua's urge to control, restrict, and fence in God. The good news isn't that we contain holiness, but that holiness frees us.

A Pentecost church is called not to decorate fences, but to dismantle them: the fences in our hearts, communities, policies, and institutions that restrict or target others. We are called to break barriers, not guard gates. Jesus enters locked, anxious rooms and speaks: “Peace,” the first word of Pentecost.

Then Jesus breathes on them: breath, Spirit, life. Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” This commission is not to defend walls or to hide behind locked doors, but to go where Jesus goes, toward those who have been excluded, marginalized, or targeted. That is where the Spirit moves.

Beloved of God, the Holy Spirit cannot be fenced in. The wind of God will blow through what we have barricaded. The fire of God will descend where we have said

it should not. The mercy of God will reach those whom we have been taught to fear.

Go into the world that God so loves. Go as people liberated from Joshua's anxiety. Go as those who trust that God's grace extends beyond our fences and borders. And may the uncontainable, fence-tearing Holy Spirit go with you, ahead of you, beside you, behind you, and within you; until every wall that divides is brought down, and every neighbor can breathe free. Amen.