"The New Order of Things"
Acts 2:1-21

It’s a wonder to behold. I’m talking about the organizational genius of my wife, Kim. Most people straighten or neaten. Some surface clean. Not Kim.

Her gift was recently on display when she was at our oldest daughter’s house. They were getting ready to redo the bathroom used by the three granddaughters and replace the upstairs carpeting. This provided an opening. The girls decided to switch rooms. They negotiated who would move where. Then Kim swept into action. In every room, every single thing came out of the closets, shelves and drawers. It all looked a big mess at first. But then piles were made for what to throw away, what to give away and what to keep. Baseboards were scrubbed, feng shui considered. Only then were items rehung and replaced. The result was an astonishing transformation—a new order of things, don’t you know?!

Today is Pentecost Sunday, which falls 50 days after Easter. It celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the people who were gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Shavuot, which commemorates the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai.

Our Jewish friends celebrated Shavuot this week. They gave thanks for the new order of life that the Law signaled for them as a people. They had been delivered from slavery to freedom, but God gave them the Law as a way of ordering their freedom so that it didn’t turn into license to do whatever was right in one’s eyes. The Law ordered life for the sake of the community, orienting behavior toward the wellbeing of one’s neighbor. If every action were done to honor one’s neighbor, that would benefit everyone. This was a radical step toward redistributing power from the one to the many.

The story of Pentecost follows this same pattern. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead inaugurated a new phase in the redemptive history of God in the world. If the greatest oppressive power of all—death—itself no longer had the power to rob people of life, everything was now possible for
everyone. The coming of the Spirit, like the coming of the Law, meant a new order of things. Old cultural hierarchies would fall, and a new age of equality would begin.

We’ll get to that in a minute, but first we need to take note of how this new order has to begin with disorder. Any time change takes place, it’s initially disorienting. The old ways have to give way to the new ways, and it all seems a mess in the process.

When the Spirit blew through Jerusalem, look how it seemed to those who were present. Luke reports that it was felt as a mighty, rushing wind. It wasn’t a gentle breeze. There were tongues of fire, as if a revolution was ignited.

In his book, *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin draws on the story of the rainbow of Noah and the flood. It came with a promise that God would not destroy the world again by water; it would be fire next time, he said—a fire that would burn away the wickedness of racism that was so deeply entrenched in American society. The new order of equality that would acknowledge the full humanity of Black Americans would not come easily or quietly. If we do not embrace the change God is wanting to bring about, Baldwin believed, we will burn in what he can only see as akin to a biblical apocalypse.

Sometimes in church we hear people talk about the Holy Spirit being the Spirit of peace and that if something causes controversy, it must not be of God because God is a God of order, not disorder. But disorder always precedes new order. And that can be painful and challenging.

Look at what happens at that first Pentecost. When the apostles start to speak in ways that every ethnic group of Jews from around that part of the world could understand in their own languages, people said they must be drunk. It was the only way they could account for this new experience. But Peter declares they are drunk on the Spirit, not spirits. The prophet Joel had foretold that the Spirit that would come upon all flesh and reorder life as they knew it. The Book of Acts unfolds this new order of things. All divisions of society will be overcome in the gospel—those between ethnic groups, young and old, men and women, slave and free.
Thirty years ago in our own church, we decided that the Spirit was calling us to declare the full equality of women alongside men in leadership and service. We would no longer view men as leaders and women as servants. All would exercise servant leadership side by side. This was a change, and for some it was so disorienting, they believed it could not be of God. They believed we must have been drunk, so to speak. They left our fellowship for other churches where they could feel more comfortable in the old order of things.

When we determined a few years ago that our gay and transgender siblings in Christ should also have full standing in the church, the same thing happened. One former member reported in the press that I had lost my mind in leading the church to this new order of things. It was the only way he could reckon it. It was disorienting. But it had to be that way for the new order of things to emerge. We believed the Spirit was at work among us and that this change was the only way we could continue to participate fully in what God was up to in the world through the church.

We are in a Pentecost moment in the American church right now. The Spirit seems unwilling to tolerate our clinging to outmoded hierarchies in the name of Jesus. The popular Bible teacher Beth Moore has left the Southern Baptist Convention, unwilling any longer to be complicit with a church that subjugates women to men when the Spirit is speaking through women, too. On another front, many church leaders are doubling down on a culture that refuses to liberate Black people from the legacy of white supremacy. They see the movement for Black equality as a threat to the peace of the church; but their real worry is the loss of the old order of things.

I had the honor of delivering the commencement address last week for the Perkins School of Theology at SMU. I told them this story. One Sunday morning in 1946, Pastor Blake Smith stood tall in the pulpit of the University Baptist Church in Austin and declared that it was past time that the University of Texas open its doors to all Texans. The time for integration had come. What’s more, he said to his all-white congregation, the time had come for their church to open its doors.
to all, regardless of race. The church’s job is to model for the world the dream of God, not to be a mere reflection of the world as it is.

Right after the benediction, predictably, an emergency deacons meeting was called for that afternoon. For hours, that all-male group grumbled on about what the preacher had said that morning, about whether he had the right to say those things, about the autonomy of the local church to decide who would and who would not be its members, about whether Blake Smith ought to be their pastor at all. After a long while, the moderator looked to the back of the room where an elderly, respected judge was sitting quietly. The man said, Judge, we haven’t heard from you on this matter. What do you think? The judge rose to his feet and solemnly said, Well, you know, I don’t like what our pastor said this morning any more than the rest of you. But I think Jesus liked it a lot.

University Baptist Church integrated that very year, becoming the first church in the Southern Baptist Convention to do so. It would take another 10 years for the University of Texas to do the same.

After my address, diplomas were handed out and to my delight and surprise, one of them was a doctoral degree conferred on Tommy Shapard, the son of our former minister to adults, Carolyn Shapard. Tommy is the minister of music at the Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida. He was one of the first people I knew who contracted COVID-19 last year. He nearly died of it.

Tommy shared with me his doctoral thesis. It has a Pentecost theme. The title is a mouthful: *I Can’t Breathe*: Toward a Pneumatology of Singing and Missional Musicking for Racial Justice in Jacksonville, Florida. His claim is that the way we sing in the white church can either reinforce racial division or heal it. It can make us feel safe from the currents of the Spirit that call us to change or we can participate in that change by singing in the new order of things that God is bringing to pass.

He builds off the Acts 2 unifying experience of people hearing the gospel in their own languages. Here’s how he put it to me: *To dream dreams in community*
requires relinquishing control to the Spirit and putting oneself in a vulnerable place—for we do not have all the answers. Letting go and living into a place of flexibility and democratic relationship can be difficult and messy if we are to allow the Spirit to supply fresh air to a Body of Christ currently suffocating from virulent forces.

The Spirit of Pentecost is still blowing through the church. It may feel disordering at first, but when we embrace it, an exciting new order of things becomes reality among us. Change can feel scary in times like these, friends, but the joy is just ahead. Amen.