

The Wind Again Blows (Acts 10:44-48)

Spike Lee's iconic 1989 film, 'Do the Right Thing,' takes place on a sweltering day in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, where the temperature isn't the only thing heating up. Centered on Mookie (played by Spike Lee), a young Black man working as a pizza delivery guy for Sal's Famous Pizzeria, the film explores the undercurrents of racial tension that bubble throughout the day.

Dany Aiello plays Sal, the owner of Sal's Famous Pizzeria, who has a wall of fame inside his restaurant. Tension emerges when Buggin' Out, played by Giancarlo Stanton, questions the pizzeria's Wall of Fame, which showcases only Italian American figures. A conflict erupts when Sal destroys Radio Raheem's boom box (portrayed by Bill Nunn).

The neighborhood's growing unease reaches a breaking point when Mookie hurls a trash can through the front window of the

restaurant. When police show up, one of the officers chokes Radio Raheem to death.

The climactic scene is a heartbreaking instance of police brutality that forces the community—and the audience—to confront the complexities of racism and justice. In a world that's not nearly as cut and dried as we often pretend, what does it even mean to do the right thing?

And even if you are able to puzzle out what the right thing to do is, when things get dicey, do you have the courage necessary to do the right thing?

It's tough to do what you know you should do. And it's certainly not made any easier when you decide that what needs doing is something **God** wants you to do.

I think about ol' Peter. There was a time when he couldn't be trusted even to know what the right thing **was**. Remember?

“There’s one of his followers. Right there. Yeah, that guy. I saw him with the outlaw they’re getting ready to string up. What’s his name? Jesus. Right. I saw him with Jesus.”

“What? I don’t know what you’re talking about! Jesus. Never heard of him. I’m from Spokane. Just in town for a shower curtain ring convention. You must be thinking of somebody else.”

But then came Pentecost. Remember that? The Holy Spirit descended on the terrified followers of Jesus, and they broke loose from their fear and started living out loud.

Since then, Peter’s been tromping all over Judea, enthused, ready with something to say at every turn. He’s been the center of attention. Big crowds. Lots of conversions. You can’t shut the guy up.

The offerings are beginning to look a bit more respectable. God is moving. Excitement fills everything they do. Peter figures he pretty much has this whole thing figured out.

And then one day, as we find in the beginning of chapter 10, Peter is praying on a roof in Joppa. He gets hungry, and the text says he fell into a trance. "He saw the heavens opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air."

And a voice says to him, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."

And Peter, always the stubborn one, says, "No way! I've never eaten anything profane or unclean—and I'm not starting now."

The voice said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times.

Well, of course, we find out that what this vision is speaking about is fixin' to unfold in the approach of some envoys from a Roman centurion named Cornelius, who wants Peter to come talk to him about God. The problem, of course, is that, on the one

hand, Peter is a Jew, and on the other hand, Cornelius is not. Cornelius is a Gentile.

As you may know, Jews and Gentiles didn't dig fishing worms together. Gentiles weren't allowed into their country clubs. They didn't want those Gentiles dating their daughters. And, if you can believe this, they even had separate drinking fountains and everything. No, Peter was brought up in a good home, and he knew not to associate with **those** people.

As it turns out, Peter eventually understands the vision to mean that God is sending him to the Gentiles. And Peter, foot-dragger and dawdler that he is, says, "If you think I'm going to soil my dead father's memory by mixing with **their** kind, you have got another think coming."

And the voice says, "I made everybody. So there's only **one** kind."

Three times this happens. Peter is bound and determined to stay, and the Holy Spirit is bound and determined for him to go. So that, finally, when Cornelius's people come, Peter tired of fighting with God, just packs his shaving kit, picks up his backpack at the door, and heads out.

When Peter and his gang finally get to Cornelius's house, he says, "You know, I'm not really supposed to be here. If my daddy saw me right now talking to a Gentile ... in a Gentile's **house**? I don't even want to think about it. But here I am anyway, so what do you want?"

Cornelius says, "God told me to send for you, so I did."

So Peter tells him about Jesus—how he suffered and died and was raised on the third day. And, lo and behold, our text for today says, "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word."

Let me ask you a question: Had you been able to ask Peter **before** the trance whether or not he wanted to go talk to some Gentiles about Jesus, what do you think he would've said? Do you think he would've wanted to go? Obviously not, if his answer to God upon seeing the vision was, "Not a chance!"

Now, let me ask you a more important question: Do you think God cared **what** Peter wanted? When God called, do you think God fretted over Peter's inadequacies, about whether or not Peter **wanted** to go?

So, let me ask you this? Why **didn't** God care a bit about what Peter wanted or about whether Peter was even prepared to talk to a Gentile (because, ostensibly, Peter had never even conversed with one before)?

Why?

Because this story's not about **Peter**; it's about the Holy Spirit.

According to this story, there's a whole world of people God is after—people some folks think ought to just stay out. But God's relentless.

God comes to us and says, "There are some folks who need my love and compassion. I want you to go to them. I want you to love them **for** me."

"Which folks?"

"**All** my children. You know who I'm talking about, the ones no respectable church wants. The ones who've been systematically told they're not welcome. The ones who don't have anybody to speak up for them. Don't talk right. Don't dress right. Don't have the right kind of money. Don't live in the right part of town. Don't love the right person. Don't have the right skin color. I want you to go to **them**."

"**Those** people? You're kidding, right? I mean, those people? Really?"

“Don’t you get it? There are no **those** people. There are only **my** people—the ones I created, the ones I brought forth from their mother’s womb, the ones I love and cherish, even when nobody else will. I want you to go to them. I want you to stand with **them**—and if necessary, stand **between** them and a world that would throw them away in a thousand and one dumpsters set aside for **those** people. Do what I tell you. Do the right thing. I will breathe and let loose my spirit in ways that will stun the world if you’ll only do what I tell you to do.”

I remember, as a kid, we used to play baseball in the field behind my house. Neighborhood kids. I played Little League, too. Don’t get me wrong. But most of the time I spent playing baseball was in a field—not a baseball field, just a field. We had to trample down the grass sometimes to find the ball.

The age ranges varied. We played with kids older and younger. One of the guys was quite a bit older and bigger—like twenty years old. He had a beard. He was a swimmer. In fact, he held some national records. That he established those records in the

Special Olympics didn't mean much to us. We thought Tom Palmer was a great guy—very nice, polite.

He'd been born with a cognitive disability that made him years younger than his actual age. So, it was cool with us to have him around. What **made** it cool was that Mike Royhans, the oldest, coolest kid in our neighborhood **said** it was cool. We never questioned anything Mike said.

One day, something happened in the game. I don't even remember what, but big Tom Palmer got really upset. He started charging toward us, the younger kids. We froze. What else do you do when you're ten and a twenty-year-old man comes barreling straight for you?

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mike Royhans, then 14 years old himself, rush up from the side and tackle Tom before he got to us. He was brave, but at 14, not nearly strong enough to take on a full-grown man. Mike got beat up pretty good—a black eye and

a bloody nose. But to us, he was like Superman—taking a beating to save us from one. It was like an episode of *The Wonder Years*.

I remember that now, fifty years later, not so much because of Mike's heroics in tackling a guy much bigger than he, or even because in the process he took the black eye and bloody nose that would surely have been ours, but because of what he did afterward.

My younger brother and I went home, still amped up on adrenaline. We were telling my mom about the whole thing, about Super Mike and his daring rescue, when we heard a knock on our screen door. My mom went to get it. Standing on our porch was Mike, his eye almost swollen shut, blood on his shirt ... with his arm hanging over the shoulder of Tom Palmer—who was sniffing. Even though it was **he** who delivered the beating to Mike, Tom stood on our front porch in tears.

Astonished. I couldn't believe it. How do you stand there comforting a guy who, not fifteen minutes before, was pummeling your face? It was beyond my comprehension.

I said to Mike, "Are you ok? What are you doing with ***him***?"

And, with wisdom that still strikes me with its profundity after all these years, Mike said, "Listen, I know that must have been scary. But you can't blame Tom. He didn't mean it. Sometimes, he just gets mad and doesn't know any other way to show it. I just didn't want you guys to think he was a bad person." And Tom cried.

And even after all these years, just thinking about that scene can bring tears to my eyes.

I've often wondered how Mike Royhans is doing. We moved away not too long after that incident. I heard he became a police officer. I'd like to tell him how big an effect he had showing up on my front porch, comforting the very man who'd just thrashed

him—I'd like to tell him how often I think about it when I have to figure out the right thing to do in a difficult situation, how often I think about it when there's a question of speaking up for people everybody else would just as soon discard.

Where does that come from?

How do you get to be **that** kind of person—the kind who does the right thing even though doing so might cost you a black eye and a bloody nose—or worse?

You want to know where **I** think it comes from? I think it comes from the breath of God washing over us—if we'll just let it. If we'll just get up and go.

We're none of us too brave on our own, none of us too wise.

We're just as prone to goof it up as not. If we're ever going to do the right thing, it's going to have to come from a power greater than we can muster up on our own.

The Spirit of the Lord moves, and the wind again blows, and just about anything can happen.

Fourteen-year-old kids can change the world. Just ask me. One changed mine.

Who knows? Even the dead might be raised. It's Easter, after all.

—Amen.