

Pentecost, June 5, 2022, St. John's

This is the Sunday of Pentecost, the fiftieth day or seventh Sunday after Easter. It is the day we “officially” recognize the arrival of the Holy Spirit in our midst. In our reading from Acts the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples with tongues of fire and they began speaking in other languages! This scene from the Book of Acts can also be viewed as the start of the Christian church because the disciples were commissioned to carry that Spirit to the rest of the world. In our Nicene Creed, which was created in most of its present form back in the fourth century, the church leaders gathered together for the event wrote that the Holy Spirit “proceeds” from the Father and the Son. Proceeds! That is such a good word! It does not run, jump, swim, or fly from the Father. If one does not become surrounded by a tongue of fire that is all right. The Holy Spirit will find you because it surrounds you and all of us. The Holy Spirit to me is a bit like radiation; you cannot see it but you can feel its effects. In the Episcopal Dictionary of the Church it states that the Spirit proceeds from the Father by “spiration”, or breathing, which is even better because the “breath” of God permeates all of creation. In our epistle this morning the Holy Spirit bestowed the gift of speaking in tongues. That is highly symbolic because in order to carry the Good News to the rest of the world the disciples would have to speak in a lot of different languages. It does not mean that speaking in tongues is a superior gift in comparison to all others and we are not to be upset if our experience of the Spirit is not marked by a visible, dramatic manifestation of fire or flame upon its arrival. It is enough for us to be prayerfully “open to suggestion”.

When I was a younger man I was briefly associated with a Christian group that was quite ebullient and enthusiastic in their worship. They were also quite judgemental and literal in their beliefs, but that's another story. I had a friend who preceded me into the group who literally changed his tune overnight, so excited and overcome was he by the “formal” arrival of the Holy Spirit into his life. I wanted some of that. I wanted to feel this fire and passion! Nothing else would do. So, on a rather cool and cloudy day (unfortunately) the members of the group and I gathered around the (unheated) swimming pool of one of the members. He was a farmer and I am not sure if his farm is even operating any more, but there we were. With tambourines banging and a chorus of singing I, accompanied by several others, jumped into the pool so that I could be baptized in the Holy Spirit. I'm not sure if I expected to exit the pool speaking Norwegian or to express some other remarkable gift, but I did expect to feel a surge of some energy, spiritual or otherwise! What I did feel was extremely wet and cold, and more than a little annoyed. So was the farmer. He kept talking about what a pain it was to keep the pool going for the amount he actually used it. At first I blamed myself for this stunning lack of a turn of events, but in the end I realized that I need not have done so.

Jesus promised that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will always be with us. It is the Spirit of Truth. It “proceeds” from God, it dwells in the church, and it consecrates its members. It speaks through the prophets (also in the Nicene Creed), including all of us, and guides us to do God's will. There are two important things to remember here. First, the Holy Spirit acting in us and through us need not be a dramatic or exciting experience. It certainly can be from time to time, but please don't blame yourself if it is not. It can also be a solemn, thoughtful, patient and enduring experience. It can be humorous. It could inspire awe. It could make you sad. If we remain open to the Holy Spirit it can be revealed in us in all these ways and more. Second, our

scripture today highlights speaking in tongues as a particularly exceptional gift. However, as the apostle Paul frequently pointed out, all the gifts of the Spirit, all of our individual abilities, can be used in service to God and they are all equally valued. Looking back I realized that I did not have to jump in a pool on a cold day. I had already been baptized as a young child. In an Episcopal Church! What I really needed to do is what we all can do; listen, pray, and it will be revealed to us. All of our gifts can be expressed in service to God.

The Tower of Babel story is interesting because it depicts the Jewish people as using their gifts, their “time, talent, and treasure” to build a structure capable of reaching the heavens. It could be viewed as a challenge to God. It ran contrary to God’s desire to see humankind spread out across the world and to experience the rich diversity of creation. If not an act of deliberate arrogance, staying in one place to build a tower was not part of the plan. Therefore, the people were dispersed. In Acts, the Holy Spirit is portrayed as a unifying force, bringing people together in service to God across the entire spectrum of creation. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended (proceeded) from heaven not to “reverse Babel”, but to instead reveal how, going forward, that the gift of the Spirit is for everyone. It can be understood by everyone and offers a new life in Christ to everyone. In many billions of unique expressions of our gifts.

I live near an elementary school and the other day I walked by as a group of children, at that wonderful, idealistic and unspoiled age, were having a “spirited” recess. It made me think. The Holy Spirit leads us to do what comes so naturally to children! They revel in creation, in the experience of their senses. They give us life and energy. In their honesty and curiosity they speak the truth and share it with us. They are unafraid of new ideas. They explore boundaries. Most of all, they accept an increasingly diverse and complex world. They are our hope for the future. On this day of Pentecost as we emerge from the pandemic and confront the many problems we face in this world, can we learn from our children? I pray that we appreciate the glory and diversity of creation even more. That we can see our interconnectedness and dependence on others more clearly. Can we take the spirit our children have in abundance, add an unspoiling dose of education and experience, and fully live into the life the Holy Spirit offers us as members of the Body of Christ? Our gifts are many and varied, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, in a world that often pushes back, we can extend our boundaries of charity, mercy, and ministry. Amen.