

Sealed by the Holy Spirit

Feast of Pentecost, June 9, 2019

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." - Acts 2:1-11

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." - John 20:19-23

As many of you know, the rite of baptism includes two basic and interrelated features. First comes the sprinkling with or immersion in water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Then, in the language of the Prayer Book, "... the Priest places a hand on the person's head, marking on the forehead the sign of the cross [using chrism if desired] and saying ... 'you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever.'"

Often when I prepare adults for baptism, I stop to comment on what they may or may not experience in baptism. "You may feel elation," I say, "or you may feel nothing. You may feel some inner response in the moment, or it may come later in the day, or a month later, or years later. Or you may never have any significant conscious or emotional response to being baptized or to being anointed by the Holy Spirit. And you may find that, for a variety of reasons, comparing your own 'spiritual' experience to the experiences of others can be problematic."

Operating in the background as I offer this counsel, I suppose, are two of this morning's Scripture texts, with their very different accounts of how the first believers in Jesus received the Holy Spirit.

The first account, from the Book of Acts, is the most familiar account and is arguably the most energetic. The shock wave of the Holy Spirit begins with a small inside circle of believers and tongues of fire. Soon the divine presence moves through a crowd of souls who have gathered in Jerusalem from every part of the known world. And if we were to keep reading beyond the point where we ended today, we would learn that by the end of the day the lives of 3000 people have been changed for the divine good, in the name of Jesus, forever.

By comparison with the account from Acts, John's story of the imparting of the Spirit could be described as considerably more discreet. We could think of it as the Episcopalian version of the story. It's a more modest, intimate and private transaction. No tongues of fire. No exotic multi-cultural

crowd. No conversions. Jesus simply breathes on the inner circle of his followers and says, "Receive the Spirit."

Also, the descent of the Spirit in Acts takes place many weeks after the resurrection and only after Jesus has ascended into heaven. In John's account, by contrast, the imparting of the spirit takes place within the very first moments of and is inseparable from Jesus' very first resurrection appearance. Surely it was life-changing and dramatically so. But John does not describe any response particular to Jesus breathing the Spirit on and into them.

The contrast between these stories may be of value to those preparing for baptism or to any of us who wonder about the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives—or what today we frequently call our 'spirituality.' Based on these two texts, we may at least hypothesize that there is no one formula for how or where or when the Spirit comes to us, apart from our Baptisms, or how we may be aware of the Spirit when it does come, or how we may or may not respond.

Natural as it may be to note or wonder about how we do or do not experience the Spirit, it is also important to note that our subjective feelings are only one small part of an infinitely larger equation. What we Christians mainly proclaim by way of the Holy Spirit is that the God who was revealed in Jesus continues with us and is in us. It's an article of faith that we may celebrate when we *feel* ecstatic and that we cling to for dear life when we are quaking due to the dark nights of the soul.

Furthermore, as different as the passages from Acts and John may be, they are united in being about mission ~ that is, moving beyond ourselves in the name of God for the good of others. The result on the first Christian Day of Pentecost is 3000 converts. And in the scene from the Gospel of John, Jesus breathes on them after saying "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*" The imparting of the Spirit, in both scenes, is directly related to mission. Spirituality for the Christians must include a purposeful sense of our gifts and our vocations and particular expressions of mission in the world.

Today's Epistle reading was written to Christians in Corinth many years after the resurrection and that first Day of Pentecost. Paul is distilling what he has learned of the Spirit and seen in the lives of those who follow Jesus: *'there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.'*

Here in 1st Corinthians, the imparting of the Spirit is still about mission. And our response may in part be to wonder about mission: yours, mine, ours. With what unique gifts has the Spirit blessed us? How can we connect the dots between those gifts and the needs of others and the world around us? When do we start? Or is there some gift that has run its course and may now be laid to rest? If we are confused, how can we get clarity? If we are tired, how can we rest?

This past week I received an email from a sometime participant here at Ascension. The email was continuing a conversation about our strengths and liabilities here as a parish, and maybe as well some implicit evaluation of my strengths and liabilities as a priest and pastor, and then the individual wrote: "*I am certain that you do a daily renewal of purpose and faith.*"

At first, I admit, I felt a little bit peeved, as if I was being lectured, and by someone who knows only a little about me. And then I felt a little defensive. I began to name ways that I *do* daily renew my faith. And then I felt that my heart and my awareness opened up, even if just a bit. Maybe it was a moment of anointing by the Spirit. I felt some conviction that allowed me to wonder more intentionally about my life and my faith.

Now I'm wondering with you, briefly, if this Feast of Pentecost might be considered for us not a daily but at least an annual 'renewal of purpose and faith' – an opportunity to review and renew our gifts, to again commit ourselves to moving beyond ourselves in the name of God for the good of others and the world. *Amen.*