

The Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday
June 9, 2019
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Acts 2:1-21
Psalm 104:25-35, 37
Romans 8:14-17
John 14:8-17, 25-27

I want to offer a word of thanks, first of all, to those of you who have done your part to get into the “spirit” of the day. I can see that some of you have made the effort to find something red to wear today for the occasion. Thank you for that effort. I cannot tell how many of you attempted to speak a foreign language (as I was too preoccupied with my own attempt to do so). But it’s clear that many of you did try. So I thank you as well.

Wearing red and speaking a foreign language ... these are a couple of ways we are put in mind of that first Pentecost. And it’s a good thing for us to do today, I think.

The only problem is that these ways of celebrating the day may miss the point.

In the first place, that first Pentecost was hardly the first time the Holy Spirit was given to Jesus’ followers. In our gospel this morning, Jesus promises (on the eve of his crucifixion) that God will give them “another Advocate,” as he describes the Spirit. When Jesus is gone, the Spirit will come among them, he says, essentially to be a companion for them in his stead.

... the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom [God] will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.

And Jesus was true to his word. As John tells the tale, the disciples (afraid that first Easter evening) were locked up in a room. And Jesus came and stood among them and, before he left them, he offered them a blessing of peace. And then Jesus “breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit ...’”

But John says it happened on that first Easter Day, not 50 days later. And while the coming of the Spirit is public and noisy in Acts, it’s subtle and intimate in John.

No, that first Pentecost was hardly the first time the Holy Spirit was given. And it was hardly the last time either. Not by a long shot!

It’s been said that the gospels tell the story of Jesus; the Book of Acts tells the story of the Holy Spirit. Throughout the book, the Holy Spirit is the driving force that pushes the Church in new ways, reaching out to new peoples.

Our reading from Acts this morning is just the start of the Holy Spirit’s work. “... there were devout Jews from every nation” there, everyone hearing their own language spoken. And Peter, to his credit, intuitively that the good news of God’s love must be for all of them.

But lest we miss the point, he's still talking about – and to – other “devout Jews.”

But from that beginning, and all through Acts, an ever-expanding circle of people are wrapped up in the good news of God's love for all. The Samaritans were next; lifelong enemies joined in one family of God.

The Spirit, we're told, put Philip on a wilderness road. And there his path crossed that of an Ethiopian eunuch, seated in a chariot. And although Philip had every reason to keep his distance, the Spirit told him to go up to the chariot and greet the stranger seated there. Before they were done that day, the man asked to be baptized. And that is what Philip did.

Think about Paul's conversion. Breathing threats of violence and murder against the Church, he headed off to a place called Damascus, on a mission to arrest early converts to the Way. But after a blinding encounter with the risen Christ, he was a changed man. These are his words:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

And then there's Peter. He once proudly boasted that he had “never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” But he had a vision one day, and a voice rebuked him, saying:

What God has made clean, you shall not call profane.

Thereafter, he was boldly proclaimed: “I truly perceive that God shows no partiality.”

And the Book of Acts itself is hardly the last word on the Holy Spirit in our midst. The Spirit has been at work in the Church down through the ages. I think it's the only way to explain someone like St. Francis of Assisi. If there's anything timeless in the notion from Acts that the Spirit comes upon us violently, blowing the doors off buildings, credit the Spirit for the tumult of the Reformation ... and every other unsettling reforming wind that has swept the Church.

It may well be that ours is a time when the Spirit is challenging and transforming our church institutions. The Episcopal Church, broadly speaking, is not the same church it used to be. Some mourn the loss of prestige we once took for granted. But I like what we are becoming. We are becoming a more boldly welcoming church and a more passionate church. We are less concerned with maintaining our reputation in society and more committed to loving God and our neighbors as ourselves. We are inspired to be, in the words of our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, “the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement.” It's Pride Month across the U.S. A generation ago, the Church would have kept its distance, but Episcopal bishops join the parades these day. The Spirit is active in our midst still, shaking things up. For the good ... and for God.

The point, we affirm, is that the Holy Spirit abides with us still. There is something more for us to do this day than merely put ourselves in mind of that first Pentecost. There is more for us to do today than wear red or to try to speak a few words in another language.

We affirm that the Spirit of truth abides with us still. And we see the signs whenever we find strength to love others even when it's hard to do. And so we lean on the Spirit to inspire the ongoing work – though it be messy at times – the ongoing holy work we are called upon to do: to love, bless, and redeem the world we live in.

*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 they were never the same again.

I came upon a poem this past week called “God Stuck Her Tongue Out” (by Michael Coffey). It's an allusion to the “divided tongues” of Pentecost ... the “Tongue” of God, the Holy Spirit come upon us. The Holy Spirit comes upon us still, the poem suggests ... and we will never be the same.

God stuck her tongue out at the church
and we grabbed hold of the budded thing
and started flapping it around the neighborhood
like a swimming pool noodle or downy pillow
and before we knew it we were speaking things
we never bothered to dream or wonder
held our tight lips taught when we ever felt them
and yet there they were wagging out:

welcome, stranger, into the fold of mercy
now you are called brother, sister, friend

gather round, immigrants, we speak your language,
no one will shun your accent or poverty here

dance your way through the door, lost ones
and teach us your wild moves and we will teach ours

stroll in you wounded souls and skins
and let us wrap and kiss your pain to healing

make room, settled ones, for the wave is surging
and it will unsettle your closed-mouth silence

nothing, not even our provincial proclivities
can stop these mouths from sputtering
words of grace that blow open any door
any wall any blue law Sunday limitations
on what Spirit can do when set free to
tousle the world's hair
until love has swept us all away ⁱ

ⁱ Michael Coffey @ <http://www.ocotillopub.org/2013/05/god-stuck-her-tongue-out.html>.