

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
June 5, 2022 – The Day of Pentecost  
Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-17, 25-27  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Just before Jesus ascended to heaven forty days after the resurrection, he told his disciples to go to Jerusalem and wait for the Spirit to come to them in a few days' time. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit did come in utterly unmistakable ways, like a violent wind and tongues of fire, and in a miracle of language as people spoke in languages they did not know and were understood. From the day of Pentecost recorded in The Acts of the Apostles until now – and for as long as there is a church on earth – the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of the followers of Jesus.

Who is the Holy Spirit and what does the Holy Spirit do? The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth who bears witness to Jesus Christ as Jesus has borne witness to the Father. As Jesus said to Philip in this morning's reading from the Gospel of John, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." The Holy Spirit bears witness to Jesus, who loves us, heals us, guides us, purifies us, and redeems us.

How does the Holy Spirit act in human lives? The Holy Spirit warms our hearts with love for God. The Holy Spirit creates in us a desire to live our lives in conformity with the life and attitudes and teaching of Jesus. The Holy Spirit moves us to become more and more the persons we were created to be – beloved children of God, made in the image of God, made to grow into the likeness of Christ.

In this morning's reading from John's Gospel we read that Jesus told his followers: "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son." It is the Holy Spirit who moves us to pray in Jesus' name. This isn't a matter of words. Anyone can say the prayer formula, "in Jesus' name." But we cannot truly pray in Jesus' name for something contrary to who Jesus is, contrary to God's will. The same goes for what we do. To act in Jesus' name means to act as an ambassador of Jesus and thus to the glory of the Father. We can love others in Jesus' name. We can't hate others in Jesus' name. We can heal others in Jesus' name. We can't destroy others in Jesus' name. The better we know what Jesus did and what he taught, the better idea we have of how we can be his ambassador in our lives.

Through the Holy Spirit we receive the grace of God that supports this Christian journey, which – we all know – is not a quick or simple journey. The Holy Spirit is present in scripture, the sacraments, prayer, Christian service and much more – all the "means of grace" that move us toward God. The action of the Holy Spirit may be strong and unmistakable, as it was on Pentecost, or it may be as subtle as the "murmur of the dove's song," the "still, small voice of God" we need all our attention to hear. The action of the Spirit is often hidden. Do you remember this parable about the kingdom of God? Jesus said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour [about sixty pounds] until all of it was leavened" (Luke 13:20-21). We cannot see the yeast. We only see its powerful effects.

Christian tradition teaches us the importance of what is called the "discernment of spirits." We certainly believe that the Holy Spirit may prompt our behavior. But there are other possibilities. We may be prompted by our own selfish desires. And we may be influenced by spiritual forces of evil. How do we know before we act? This is an extremely important question. If you have ever been mistaken in your discernment of spirits, or if you have

witnessed the results of such a mistake in the life of another person or in the church, you will know what I mean.

Remember that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of Christ. We can test what we think are prompts of the Spirit by examining them in light of what we know about Jesus. We may ask ourselves if the action we feel prompted to do is something aligned with the teaching of Christ. We may ask ourselves if it is likely that Jesus would ask us to act in this way. If we study the Gospels and pray with them until our hearts are full of the knowledge of Jesus, we will become better able to discern the true prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Often the work of the Holy Spirit is subtle. Learning to understand and act upon the prompting of the Holy Spirit is a spiritual exercise that takes regular practice. How might the Holy Spirit speak to us? This speaking may be an interior experience. For example, have you ever felt suddenly moved to pray for someone you may not have been thinking about at the time? This could happen anywhere and at any time. Do you pray then and there, or do you talk yourself out of it, promising to pray later when you are at home and it's "time" for prayer? What should you do? When the Spirit speaks, act. Stop and pray wherever you are. You may feel the Holy Spirit move you to make a phone call or speak a kind word to someone or write someone a note or an email or offer someone some help. With practice, active response to the promptings of the Holy Spirit becomes habitual in our daily lives. And we find that our action in following the guidance of the Holy Spirit is often validated by others. Someone may tell you, for instance, that the phone call you made was just what the person needed at that very moment. The timing when we obey the prompts of the Spirit can seem almost miraculous.

The Holy Spirit also speaks to us through other people. Someone's spoken or written words may touch our souls and inspire us to deeper faith or greater love for God, our neighbors and ourselves. The example of someone's life may be the means the Holy Spirit uses to speak to us. Another person may invite us to join an activity, and we feel that the Holy Spirit is speaking to us in that invitation. Again, when the Spirit speaks to us, and we are convinced it is the Holy Spirit, it is good to act. This is one way that we make real the words of the Lord's Prayer, "thy will be done."

How do we know if we are growing in our life with God? There are many "tests" described by Christians over the centuries. Paul wrote a letter to the church in Galatia in Asia Minor. He exhorted the people to live by the Spirit. Paul described the fruit of the Spirit in this list: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). It is a good list to meditate on. Is your faith in Christ leading you to grow in these qualities? Are you cooperating with the Holy Spirit so that, over time, you are embodying and expressing these virtues more fully? When you are confronted with the choice of being kind or unkind, are you kind? When you have the opportunity to be generous, do you resist or do you give with a good grace? Are you becoming more or less gentle in your dealings with others? Can you hold your tongue in kindness to your neighbor? Are you more or less faithful in prayer?

The Holy Spirit will gently – and sometimes rather uncomfortably – lead us to become individuals whose lives show forth these and other qualities of grace. The Holy Spirit will lead us to see with Christ's eyes, to love as Christ loved, to serve others in Jesus' name. May we say "yes" to the Holy Spirit and grow in love and service, now and always! In Jesus' name. Amen.