

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
The Day of Pentecost – May 28, 2023
Acts 2:1-21
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Today is Pentecost, one of the great feast days of the church year. The events of the day we are remembering are recorded in The Acts of the Apostles, the sequel of Luke's Gospel. When Jesus appeared to the disciples after the resurrection and before his ascension, he had instructed them to wait in Jerusalem "for the promise of the Father" (Acts 1:4). Jesus had said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5). So, the disciples were gathered together in Jerusalem, waiting, and they were there "when the day of Pentecost had come" (Acts 2:1).

The Jewish festival of Pentecost was held on the fiftieth day after Passover to mark the conclusion of the harvest of the winter grain crop. We can read about this festival in the Old Testament, in the book of Deuteronomy (16:9-12). It was a time of celebration when the Israelites gave offerings of thanksgiving for God's blessings. Pentecost was one of three yearly "pilgrim festivals," when all Israelite males were expected to go to the Temple in Jerusalem. This explains why Jerusalem was filled with Jews from every nation.

On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came to the disciples in a very dramatic way. There was "a sound like the rush of a violent wind" (Acts 2:2). Then "tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them" (Acts 2:3). In our church a bishop's hat, called a mitre, is shaped like a flame, to remind us of the Holy Spirit appearing in this form at Pentecost. When the Bishop performs rituals in which he or she prays for the Holy Spirit to act, as in Confirmation and Ordination, the Bishop wears the mitre to signify the Holy Spirit. The color of church furnishings and vestments is red today, again, to remind us of the tongues of fire that rested on the disciples at Pentecost.

Finally, we read in the book of Acts that "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages" (Acts 2:4). We can imagine the startling sights and the sounds of this event! It is not surprising that a crowd gathered to investigate. Scripture tells us that the people in the crowd were "bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each" (Acts 2:6). By the power of the Holy Spirit the disciples spoke in languages they did not know, and they were understood. What were the disciples speaking about? In the middle of today's reading we find out: "in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power" (Acts 2:11).

Christian tradition considers the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the disciples at Pentecost as the "birthday of the church." On our birthday we remember that day of Pentecost when the people of God were gathered to give thanks to God for God's blessings, and the Holy Spirit came among them with power: with the sound of a violent wind, with tongues of fire, and with supernatural speech about God's deeds of power.

The Holy Spirit is constantly present in the world, in the church, and in the lives of people who follow Jesus. For the most part, the action of the Holy Spirit is more subtle than on the day of Pentecost, quieter than the sound of a violent wind, less visible than tongues of fire. The work of the Holy Spirit is more like Jesus' parable about the kingdom of God found in Luke's Gospel (13:20-21): "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 60 pounds –] until all of it was leavened." The action of the Holy Spirit is often not visible, but its effects are. St. Paul

described some of these effects in his letter to the Galatians (5:22-23), what we call “the fruits of the Spirit:” love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

In this morning’s reading from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians he speaks about the gifts of the Holy Spirit which are given to individual Christians “just as the Spirit chooses” (1 Corinthians 12:3b-13). He makes an important point, which must not be passed over. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” The Holy Spirit’s gifts are given to individuals, yes, but they are not given primarily for our own “personal enjoyment.” They are given to be shared and for the building up of the body of Christ. We may certainly enjoy the “fruits” of living according to the Spirit – peace and joy, for example – but they are the result, not the goal, of authentic spiritual life.

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.

As I look back, I see that in the course of my life I have sometimes been mistaken about people, gullible and naïve. Through sad and painful experience – in the church and outside of the church – I have learned that evil often finds a way into human life and human interactions through an excess of egotism. When people are “puffed up” with their own self-importance, using their power for self-aggrandizement, interested in exerting control over others, thinking themselves superior to others, I can imagine the forces of evil seeing this and saying, “Ah, a straight and easy path for us!” I recognize that my experience has influenced me to emphasize the virtue and practice of humility in the Christian life. You may resonate with my experience. Surely your own life has taught you important lessons about the life of the Spirit.

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 or the words we are about to speak are aligned with the teaching of Christ and his example of self-giving love. We may ask ourselves if it is likely that Jesus would ask us to act or speak in this way. Many spiritual writers, such as St. Ignatius of Loyola, have emphasized the value of self-examination in the life of following Christ – a regular practice of stepping back and checking what we have done and said in the light of the Spirit, praying for the Spirit’s help to grow toward God. 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.

The Holy Spirit may speak to us through other people in a great variety of ways. The example of others’ lives may be the means the Holy Spirit uses to speak to us. Recently we have remembered the love of mothers. We have been inspired by hearing about the good lives of Kit Sherrill and Phil Smith. Today we remember men and women who gave so much for the common good of our country and its citizens. The Holy Spirit can use the goodness of others to encourage goodness in ourselves and in our communities, words and deeds offered for the common good. 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, step by step, now and always! In Jesus’ name. Amen.