

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
May 19, 2024 – The Day of Pentecost
Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15
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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. He promised them this: "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). 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. Our lesson from the Gospel of John helps us understand who the Holy Spirit is and what the Holy Spirit does. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth who bears witness to Jesus Christ as Jesus has borne witness to the Father.

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. The action of the Holy Spirit may be strong and unmistakable, as it was on Pentecost, or it may be as subtle as the "still, small voice of God" we need all our attention to hear.

How does the Holy Spirit act in human lives? Who could tell all the ways? But as a beginning we may say that the Holy Spirit creates in us a desire to live our lives in conformity with the life and attitudes and aspirations of Jesus Christ. 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. Through the Holy Spirit we receive the grace of God that supports our Christian journey.

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. St. Paul identified many of the effects of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). When we see these qualities in our lives and in the church, we may give thanks to the Holy Spirit.

So far, I have described the work of the Holy Spirit in "church terms." After all, we are gathered in the church and most or all of us would identify ourselves as followers of Jesus. But we must remember that when we speak of the Holy Spirit, we are speaking of God. And God is never limited by human traditions or human understanding. The Holy Spirit surely is at work in the lives and traditions of people who are not Christian. When we see what we have called the effects of the Holy Spirit in people's lives, such as those listed by St. Paul, we may surely say that God has been at work. Think of the words of the Eucharistic Prayer from Enriching Our Worship, when we ask God to "Breathe your Spirit over the whole earth and make us your new creation... and in the fullness of time bring us, with all your saints, from every tribe and language and people and nation, to feast at the banquet prepared from the foundation of the world." We know that God has called us to be followers of Jesus. We don't know all the ways God calls others to be God's saints.

We may say that it is the work of the Holy Spirit within each of us that has brought us here to this place today where we worship God, gathered in a community of believers in Jesus

Christ. We believe that when we gather in Jesus' name, Jesus is with us, as he promised. So, we may feel the Holy Spirit during our worship together. This past Easter Sunday I felt a special joy during our service, much more than usual even for Easter, and I would name that the Holy Spirit among us.

How else does the Holy Spirit act in our lives? Do you sometimes feel your heart filled with love for God – really full of love – flooded with love? That's the Spirit. Have you ever been surprised by the compassion you can extend to someone, perhaps someone you have had conflict with, knowing that your compassion in action is "more than you"? The Spirit is with you. Do you feel moved to pray for someone or thank God for someone you haven't been thinking of? Do you feel moved to write a check, make a phone call, write a note, send someone a gift, visit someone? The Spirit may be at work. Have you felt courage or peace or joy in unlikely situations? Give thanks to the Spirit. Have you sensed the presence of Someone greater than yourself, perhaps as you work in your garden or walk in the beauty of God's creation? You may have encountered the Holy Spirit. Have you felt compelled to pray with adoration and gratitude to God? It is the Holy Spirit – God within us – who moves us toward God in prayer and in our lives.

The Holy Spirit may act in these and many other ways in our hearts. We believe that the Holy Spirit also works 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. We usually think of this in positive terms, of being inspired by someone, perhaps moved to imitate his or her life. In my experience the Holy Spirit has also acted through other people in negative terms; that is, by showing me what an ungodly path looks like, a path to avoid as I make my way in life. Another person may invite us to join an activity, and we feel that the Holy Spirit is speaking to us in that invitation. When the Spirit speaks to us, and we are convinced it is the Holy Spirit, it is good to act. This is one way we make real the words of the Lord's Prayer, "your will be done."

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. As Jesus said, "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." We can test what we think are prompts of the Spirit by examining them in light of what we know about Jesus. 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.

Jesus said, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:23). Day by day may we prepare our hearts, in every way the Holy Spirit guides us, to be the home of God, now and forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.