

Pentecost Day, May 19, 2024

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, as we hear to the gift of the Holy Spirit and as we celebrate this day, may your Spirit of Love open our hearts and make us love ever more faithfully. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

The great story Amy just read for us, about that first Pentecost, fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus, as recorded in the Book of Acts, recounts the coming of the Holy Spirit on the friends and followers of Jesus. And now they too do spectacular things: speaking in different languages, telling the Good News of Jesus to all, and empowered by the Holy Spirit resting on them like tongues of fire! An amazing sight, an amazing sound, like the rush of a wind, and later we are told that three thousand that day become followers of Jesus in this Way of Love. Little wonder that Pentecost is seen as a great feast day of the church, and some even characterize it as the birthday of the church, the embodiment of Christ's Way of Love after Jesus is no longer on the scene to lead it. The Holy Spirit, that power of God's love in action, this is an incredible legacy for us. Today we bring out the red vestments in honor of that Holy Spirit, we sing songs of praise and we hope our hearts and souls to the power of that Love divine. And from that first Pentecost Day nearly two millennia ago, Christians have done this, seeking that same experience of being fully inspired by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Throughout Christian history this has been the case, and probably most familiar to us is the early twentieth century manifestation of the "Pentecostal Revival," a movement of charismatic preachers, people speaking in tongues, shouting, falling to the ground shaking, overcome with the Spirit; all the things, of course, that would seem completely out of place in an Episcopal Church, even an open community like Good Shepherd here in Barre. I've been here twelve years now, and although we've had some spirited worship, it is nothing that would hold a candle to the goings on in a Pentecostal Church!

I remember a time about twenty years ago when I was the pastor of a church in West Harlem in New York City. A young man came by, and we walked inside the sanctuary together. He had not been in a church since he was a child and he was full of questions. He asked what kind of a church we are, and I answered that this was an Episcopal Church. He misheard me, though, because he exclaimed, "A Pentecostal Church?!?" I thought about it a second, and then said, "Yes, we are a Pentecostal Church because we believe in the Holy Spirit." So yes, maybe the Episcopal Church can be a Pentecostal Church, despite some evidence to the contrary when we think of the popular understanding of Pentecostalism. I think the important question for us is how do we live **by** and **in** that Spirit? Recall that last week, thinking about the ascension of Jesus, I preached that the important question for us is not where did Jesus go, but much more relevant to us is how do we live as Jesus' followers if Jesus is not physically here present with us? This is the promise of Jesus, that we will be given a gift: a Spirit of Truth will be given to us and that Spirit will guide us into God's Truth. But how do we live by that Spirit and how do we live in that Spirit?

The other amazing story Amy just read for us is a vision of the prophet Ezekiel: that valley of dry bones, and as Ezekiel concludes, they were *very* dry! No life at all. But it is the gift of this spirit, that word of prophecy, that causes the bones to live, covered by skin, and then that divine breath, that Spirit brings life...and then God turns the tables on Ezekiel: Ezekiel and the people of Israel couldn't see the power of this Spirit; they whine and complain, "our bones are dried up; our hope is lost; we are completely cut off. Poor, poor pitiful me!" But God's promise is so much more real and present than all our petty complaints: this is the promise of truth; the power of the Spirit to bring new and abundant life, the power of the Spirit to bring to an end the injustice and violence of our world. This divine Spirit, it is the power of God to open up a new horizon for us, the power of God to lead us in love toward those peaceful tomorrows, the power of God's loving kindness to hold a vision for us of a new way to live, a new way to gather as faithful community. The Spirit of Love, that Spirit promised by Jesus as we walk in the Way of Love, this is that power that inspires us, leads us and moves our hearts and our souls toward the divine, toward to horizon of our new life.

To return once more to that first Pentecost morning; Peter addresses those who witness this extraordinary sight - Peter recalls the words of one of the earlier prophets, the lesser known Joel, but with words that are so fitting and powerful: in the age of the Spirit, God's power will inspire all: young people, young women and young men will will prophesy, that is, they will see this coming future of God's reign of justice and peace, and seek to bring this new as a reality in their lives; the young will see this vision and even the elders will dream dreams of this coming age of peace, equity and tranquility. Even those who are the most marginalized, the slaves, will be liberated to see this vision and to make it a reality.

In our own times, here in this place, a community with high rates of poverty and disabilities, a community like some many others, assaulted by the scourge of drug addiction, and as we look to the wider world, our nation divided, almost as badly as at any other point in our history, at a time when we still need racial healing to recover from the deep wounds of racism deeply embedded in our history, at a time of rising violence in too many forms to name, and finally seeing that we are a world at war, over a century of incessant wars, now raging in Sudan, Ukraine and most tragically Gaza, with the thousands of deaths from warfare and now the immanent starvation of the survivors, and no hope of a ceasefire at all — indeed all this and more, the personal tragedies we all face, and the struggles in our own lives, all of this makes that question of how do we live by the Spirit, how do we live in the Spirit, makes this question all the more pressing.

As we see from Ezekiel, to be distracted by our shortcomings, to claim hope is lost and that we are cut off, that our bones are all dried up, is to miss the Spirit of Truth given plainly for us to see: God today acts to inspire us, to move us, to open our hearts and souls to live deeply in this Love divine. We gather here this morning once more on Pentecost to give thanks for the gift of this Spirit of Love, a Spirit that that both presages the coming age of God's justice and peace, and gives to the courage and strength to be God's peacemakers and justice seekers in our own day. May the spirit increase and abound in our lives in the days and the weeks to come and may we each seek to live both by and in this Spirit. Thanks be to God for this amazing gift of grace and thanks be to Christ for leading us in the Way of Love. Amen.