

Yr. A, Pentecost Day  
May 31, 2020  
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan  
St. Peter's Episcopal Church  
1583 Words

Lessons: Acts 2:1-21  
Psalm 104:25-35, 37  
1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12:3b-13  
John 20:19-23

“Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!” For the past 49 days, this has been our joyful proclamation, and it still fits today. After all, Pentecost is the 50<sup>th</sup> and final day of the Easter season.

Yet, it is also the pivotal day we celebrate the ongoing gift of God’s Holy Spirit. It’s the day we pivot our attention to the ways *we* respond to our risen Lord. Maybe, we should shift our proclamation in order to exclaim, “Alleluia! The Spirit is with us! The Spirit is with us indeed. Alleluia!” You see, today is the day the “ball lands in our court!” So, how shall we live and move and have our being in *this*, our season?

One of my favorite narratives in all of Holy Scripture is this liminal moment at the hinge of St. Luke’s masterful, 2-volume story. As you know, Volume 1 is the Gospel according to St. Luke. Volume 2 is his record of the Acts of the Apostles.

Acts is—*literally*—a story of the actions that ordinary people performed in response to Jesus, *through* the extraordinary power of the Holy Spirit. So, whereas in Volume 1 we heard the story of Jesus; in Volume 2 we hear the story of *his* Holy Spirit, begotten, not made, *also* of one Being with the Father, and thoroughly, eternally empowering ordinary human beings *like us* to perform actions in response to Jesus.

We believe in this Giver of life, whom we *encounter* as proceeding from the Father and the Son. And we worship and glorify the Holy Spirit, *especially today*, because this Spirit has been abundantly, creatively, and cooperatively present from the beginning—Wind sweeping over the face of the waters, and Breath inspiring dust to come alive in the image of God. (Nicene Creed & Genesis)

This Spirit has regularly descended—sometimes like a dove; other times like tongues of fire or violent wind; and sometimes **not** as wind or fire or earthquake, but rather.....as the sound of sheer silence. (Jesus’ baptism, day of Pentecost, and Elijah in the cave)

God’s incredible promise, according to the prophet, Joel, is this: “I will pour out my Spirit...upon *all flesh*.” In other words, God’s Holy Spirit does not have discriminating taste. (recited by Peter in Acts 2)

St. Paul helps us understand that it is, in fact, the Spirit of our Father in heaven, communicating **with** the Spirit in us, reminding us that we (already) *are* children of God. Likewise, this...Spirit helps us in our weakness when we don’t even know how to pray as we should. God’s very Spirit inside you expresses the loving truth—*from* you, *about* you, and *for you*—with sighs...too deep for words. (Romans 8)

The good news is that God, who already *knows how to search* your broken heart, this God is able to hear and willing to receive *your Spirit’s* intercession. Therefore, neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, (*thanks* to the Holy Spirit!) Such is the power that ordinary people like us get to share in common with an extraordinary God...and with one another. (Romans 8)

At the same time, you *cannot* direct, control, or tame God’s Holy Spirit, for you *might hear the sound*, but you do not know where this Spirit comes from and you (certainly) do not know where this Spirit is going. (John 3.8)

All we can hope to do is recognize her Wisdom, spoken through the prophets, and her Presence, revealed in this one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, the Bride of Christ. (Nicene Creed, also acknowledging some of the feminine imagery applied to God's Wisdom and Christ's Church)

This is why we humbly *welcome* God's Holy Spirit to enable the miracle of one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and to sanctify modest gifts of bread and wine to become the Body of Christ and his Blood of the new Covenant. (Nicene Creed and Eucharistic Prayer)

Perhaps most importantly, we pray that we, ourselves, might be sanctified by the Holy Spirit, so we will have the strength and courage to live no longer for ourselves (alone), but rather that we might eagerly serve God in unity, constancy and peace. (Sanctification prayer in the Eucharistic Prayer)

Finally, we trust the power of God's Holy Spirit to bring about the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. There is nothing else which can bring us to that heavenly country, with all the glorious saints (and miserable sinners) from ages past whom God knows *and* loves, ...through the power of the Spirit. (Nicene Creed)

You might reasonably say, "Well, that's a nice ode to the Holy Spirit, a tidy description of what we believe according to the Nicene Creed, with some of our favorite Scriptures helping to spell it out, but what does it mean to me...*right now*? Sure, I can worship and glorify the Holy Spirit on this special day of Pentecost, but what am I to do with this 'proverbial ball that has landed in my court?' How am I—an ordinary person—supposed to act in response to my risen Lord? What should I do with my ordinary life in light of this extraordinary power that I get to share with God and with others?

I am in the midst of reading a collection of short stories by Scott Gould.<sup>1</sup> They are set in a small town near the sandy banks of the Black River in the South Carolina low country. The narrator is a boy with a *strong spirit*, navigating the tempests of adolescence while searching for truth or *even goodness* among a group of mostly *dispirited* adults.

His dad is *one of those* tragic characters. He has given up on the Church; and yet, because he has a beard, a scar, and only half a stomach (a self-inflicted injury from the Vietnam War); the dad gets cast as Jesus every year in the Easter play. One year he failed to say the most important line, the one that comes at the climax of the final act of the whole play: "Father, forgive them."

As I read this short story, I thought about my friends in St. Peter's Players trying to remember all their lines in all the plays they perform at *our Church*. I cannot fathom the anxiety of being on stage and forgetting my lines, or even being on stage next to someone who has forgotten their lines. Imagining that prolonged silence makes my hands begin to sweat.

In the story, titled *Stand-in Jesus*, several of the actors on stage for the crucifixion began whispering the line *for him*. "Father, forgive them." Nothing happened. The director, behind the curtain began hissing the line for him. *Still nothing*. They thought he forgot to say the most important words of the play, but really, he just *couldn't say it*.

He didn't think he could express forgiveness—for anybody else or himself—any more. The cringe worthy awkwardness of that scene makes you want to laugh; the tragedy of it makes you want to cry.

So, what does this have to do with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost? What does this have to do with the ball in your court? What does it have to do with our acts in response to Jesus, our risen Lord?

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Gould, "Stand-in Jesus" in *Strangers to Temptation*, (Spartanburg, SC: Hub City Press, 2017).

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus appeared before his followers, huddled in fear behind locked doors. He gave them three gifts. First, he gave them the gift of his peace. "Peace be with you," he said. Second, he gave them the truth. He showed them his hands and his side. In other words, he showed them that love will leave you with scars. So, finally, he gave them the power of his own Spirit. He literally breathed on them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus said.

That *last gift*—the gift of the Holy Spirit—is meant to strengthen us so that we can endure the wounds that love entails, and so that we can face the truth, the scars that come from being vulnerable. The Holy Spirit empowers ordinary people to perform extraordinary acts, in response to our vulnerable, loving, and risen Lord.

The Holy Spirit is like those other actors on the stage, whispering the most important line of the play, helping us to remember what to say and how to act. God's Spirit is just a whisper, though; it's not a hammer. We are never forced to express forgiveness or love. We're just empowered to perform these acts...maybe reminded to do these acts.

Jesus concludes this triple gifting moment with his followers by saying, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." You see, we get to decide for ourselves what to give away and what to keep...what to forgive and what to retain. For heaven's sake, retain the power of God's Holy Spirit, which enables and reminds ordinary people like us to perform extraordinary acts of love. For heaven's sake, do not retain the sins, the brokenness, and the bitterness that we are free to release. Letting go of self-inflicted pain is one of the ways we can be healed.

Pentecost is our reminder that the ball is in our court. Our risen Lord has accomplished everything he set out to do. Now it is our turn to act. The good news is that we never have to act alone. We have the eternal gift...of the power...of God's Holy Spirit. In other words, "Alleluia! The Spirit is with us! The Spirit is with us indeed. Alleluia!"

Amen.