

THE DAY OF PENTECOST (A)

John 14:15-21
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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I suspect that Pentecost — the occasion of the descent of the Holy Spirit — gets misinterpreted rather regularly. And not just a little bit. Judging by popular theology, by churches which call themselves “pentecostal”, and many televangelists, it seems that many people generally get Pentecost *completely backwards*.

I think we’ve heard the story of the wind, and the tongues-of-flame, and the crowds-hearing-the-sermon-in-their-own-languages, enough to believe that the promise of Pentecost is *deliverance, celebration, victory, and strength*. The signs of Pentecost, after all, are *mighty*. And what is the Holy Spirit, if it is not God’s own agent — the very Spirit of the resurrected Jesus — now on earth to accompany us with signs of *wonder* and *power*?

Except that the promised Holy Spirit is the presence of not just the risen Christ, but the *crucified* and risen Christ. And so, we should never expect things to be so easy. In the cross of Christ, we see God’s *strength mediated through suffering*. In the cross, God reveals his *victory achieved through defeat*. In the cross, we find *new life pledged and provided through death*. The crucified and resurrected God we meet in Jesus is a God revealed in paradox. And so we should look for no less in the Holy Spirit — for the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus.

San Francisco Theological Seminary Professor, Jana Childers writes about the understanding of the Holy Spirit in the Pentecostal church in which she was raised:

*“The Holy Spirit is a gentleman,”
[that’s what] the elders of [our congregation]
were fond of saying:
“He never forces his way in, and goes only where he is invited.” But
the first few verses of Acts 2
seem to tell a different story...
the Holy Spirit’s entrance...is anything but discreet.
No gentleman caller,
this violent phenomenon enters...with a roar...*

*Many Christians have become accustomed
to thinking of the Holy Spirit
as more of a Hawaiian breeze than a Chicago gale.
However...the Spirit does not always arrive
as a still, small voice or a faint stirring in the heart.
The Holy Spirit’s power is not always subtle, fragile, or polite...*

it can be electric, atomic, and volcanic.

Consider two of the paradoxes of Pentecost. First, the Holy Spirit does *not* come to solve our problems, but rather to *create* them. Now of course, the Spirit does solve some problems — most notably the problem of our lack of faith. As Luther teaches in his Small Catechism:

*I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort
believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him.
But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel,
enlightened me with his gifts,
and sanctified and kept me in true faith.*

But even as he solves that problem, the Spirit stirs up other difficulties. Consider that absent the coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples could go back to their previous quiet careers as fishermen. One could imagine hearing Peter and Andrew, James and John, explaining, “Sure, it was a wild and exciting three-year-ride, and that Jesus sure was an insightful teacher, but maybe we needed to get that out of our system before we could settle down and resume the family business.” But, once the Spirit comes, that return to normalcy is no longer possible. The disciples will now be propelled throughout the ancient world to herald the unlikely message that God has redeemed the creation through Jesus — an itinerant preacher from the backwaters of Palestine who was executed for treason and blasphemy. So, the Holy Spirit solves some problems, but he also creates new problems — or at least new challenges.

New York Times columnist David Brooks recently challenged new college graduates to eschew the American obsession with self-fulfillment and instead find themselves in service to others by making and keeping what he described as “sacred commitments” and by rising to the challenges they discover all around and outside of them. In his May 30th column he wrote:

*Most successful young people don't look inside
and then plan a life.
They look outside and find a problem,
which summons their life...
Most people don't form a self and then lead a life.
They are called by a problem,
and the self is constructed gradually by their calling.*

I don't know what religious affiliation Brooks may have, but the thrust of his column certainly echoes the teaching of our Lord about finding your life in losing it for his sake. And what is true for us as individuals is also true for us as a community. Congregations don't really discover themselves, until they give themselves away. You can spend a lot of time and energy on developing a well-

thought-out and excellently-expressed mission or vision statement, or devising a marketing or outreach effort, but they are no substitute for looking around one's area and simply asking, "*Who needs us?*" and "*What can we do with our resources to bring God's love in Jesus to this corner of the world?*"

And then there's a second, closely connected paradox: the Holy Spirit doesn't prevent failure. In fact, the Spirit frequently *invites* failure. Or, to put it slightly differently, the Holy Spirit invites us to find fulfillment and victory in and through our *setbacks* and *failures*. Motivational speakers will often use phrases such as "Failure is not an option." But rightly understood, in the Church, failure is not only an option, it is *inevitable*. Look at what happened to Jesus. Our Lord himself taught us, "*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit*" (Jn 12:24). In John's Gospel, this dying is Christ's glory. And of course, it is our glory as well.

Further — and living in a success-obsessed world can lead us to forget this — living as people of Pentecost is not ultimately about us, and neither is it up to us. God is God. He's the creator. He's the Savior. He's the Holy Spirit. And only God can bring the kind of redemption we long for and need. Our job is to partner with God's work wherever we can discern it. If the cross of Jesus teaches us nothing else, it teaches that God's success will not always look like success to the world, and victory may often come disguised as defeat. The question is not whether we're successful. The question is always whether we're faithful.

And this perspective grants us a measure of freedom to throw ourselves into seemingly lost causes, freedom to place ourselves on the side of those who are most vulnerable, and freedom to take great risks and dare great ventures. Why? Because we trust that whatever the immediate results of our efforts, both our hopes and our future are secured *not by our* abilities but by God's good promise. His promise pledged to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And now sealed in the Holy Spirit.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

