

Calvary Episcopal Church
Ashland, Kentucky
Sermon for May 27, 2012 ~ The Day of Pentecost
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The Feast of Pentecost celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church in fulfillment of the promise Jesus made to his disciples: “But the Advocate, 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.”

Who is the Holy Spirit? The scriptures do not really define who the Spirit is except in terms of what he does. While we sometimes use metaphor and simile to speak of the Holy Spirit, these are really weak and mechanical terms compared to the personalistic terms in which the Spirit is best described. The Holy Spirit is a divine being, not a thing. And, this Spirit is never identical with the human spirit: rather, he works from the outside, with us, but Other than us.

The Holy Spirit has been a neglected subject in Christian teaching through the centuries. Perhaps that is why the Holy Spirit is so often misunderstood. For example, some have identified the Spirit with the individual conscience. The Holy Spirit has been identified with the human mind, a view which seems to deny the human freedom to choose or resist the will of God. Some people believe that the Holy Spirit manifests himself primarily (or solely) in unusual outer actions such as speaking in tongues, loud noises, gestures, and dancing. In such instances, the Holy Spirit seems to take possession of the individual and control one’s actions.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the Hebrew word *ruah*, meaning “breath,” is often used to speak of the Spirit of God. In this way, the writers referred to the nearness of God, involved in nature as well as the life-giving, reforming source of strength, involved with the entire community or nation of Israel and through the messages of the prophets.

The New Testament emphasis on the Holy Spirit takes a slightly different turn. The Holy Spirit is still taken to be God present with us, but the Holy Spirit of the New Testament points specifically to Jesus Christ *after* God has acted mightily in him to bring about redemption for all humankind. The Greek word *pneuma* can mean “breath or wind” but also means “will or soul.” In the New Testament, we have the record of Jesus’ teaching on the Holy Spirit, the experience of Pentecost, and St. Paul’s teaching to guide us to an understanding.

Given this background, what do *I* believe about the Holy Spirit. What is on my mind and in my heart when I stand and say, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken by the prophets.”

I believe the Holy Spirit creates and renews the Church.

The death of the Church has been prophesied repeatedly throughout history. But, as someone has wisely said, “the first essential of a quiet funeral is a willing corpse” and the Church is anything but a “willing corpse.” Behind the failures she shares with every other human institution, she represents something life cannot go on without. The Church prevails. Like the Phoenix, rising from its own ashes, the Church is renewed and preserved by the work of the Holy Spirit.

At Pentecost, the Spirit was revealed as the One who spoke not only to holy persons but to all persons. The miraculous gift so commonly called “tongues” was actually not a gift of speech at all but one of hearing. Persons heard the gospel in their own language. It was something new. The work of the Holy Spirit infuses into the life of the followers something new each time the claim of Jesus Christ is made significant to individuals. The call of the Spirit is always a summons to life in community and each birth in the community of the Holy Spirit adds something new.

When there is a baptism, a confirmation or reception, or a reaffirmation, don't you sense the new-life-giving Spirit at work? Don't you see the Church changing and growing? Don't you realize that God recreating the Church before your very eyes?

I believe the Holy Spirit also teaches the Church, bringing illumination, understanding, and wisdom to our common life.

God has given us minds. Why would God choose to bypass the mind in his dealings with us? Every conceivable breakdown in human intelligence has claimed the Holy Spirit as its inspiration. God sent the Holy Spirit to bring light and order and wisdom and counsel and might and understanding to God's People. The Holy Spirit illumines the mind and enables it to work for God.

Jesus, at the end of his earthly ministry, facing the cross, promised his disciples that he would send the Comforter the Counselor, to bind their hearts together in love and to strengthen them in their mission (Jn. 13-17). “When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all truth (Jn. 16:13). He will come to give them direction and to “glorify” Christ (Jn. 16:14). Luke tells of Jesus' command that they remain in the city until they are “clothed with power from on high (Lk. 24:49).”

The Holy Spirit teaches the Church.

I believe the Holy Spirit blesses the Church.

One way the Holy Spirit blesses the Church is by bestowing spiritual gifts upon the church's members. Spiritual gifts are more than skills or abilities. Those can be acquired. The gifts of the Spirit are not acquired but granted. Most of us spend very little time thinking about our spiritual gifts. There are numerous gifts listed in the Bible. We are, perhaps, most familiar with those listed by St. Paul in his epistle to the Romans: “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry in ministering; the teacher in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness (Rom. 12:6-8).” And, those he lists in Ephesians: “But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. . . The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ (Eph. 4:7, 11-13).” There are many gifts, but one Spirit. The gifts are given not for the private enjoyment of the individual but to empower the Church for her mission.

Finally, I believe the Holy Spirit leads the Church in praise of the Living Christ.

According to St. Paul, no one can say, “Christ is Lord” except through the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. It is the movement of the Holy Spirit bearing witness with our spirits and enabling us to magnify Christ as the sovereign. But even that inspiration is not purely for our private enjoyment.

When we are moved by the Spirit we are always moved toward others. That is why schismatic behavior is heretical. Christians should always be very cautious when there is a call to walk apart from other Christians. Likewise, Christians should always resist the inner voice that says, "I can worship God as well on the golf course as in Church." The call to discipleship is always a call to share our relationship with Christ in community with his sisters and brothers. One can be reverent and worship God in solitude. Private devotions are an important part of the Christian life. But how can we avoid the call of the Psalmist, "Come, worship the Lord with me and let us exalt God's name together." This is psychological common sense as well as sound Christian doctrine. All our deepest experiences are kept alive and vital by sharing with others in community. The New Testament calls this sharing *koinonia*.

In a service of corporate worship, one feels not only the companionship of the living, but also the companionship of those who have gone before. Together as one world-wide, age-long family we gather around the banquet table and its host. With all the company of heaven we sing songs of praise and thanksgiving. All this we do at the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Multitudes would bear witness that in the established habit of corporate worship, they have found clarification and confirmation of their faith, the reorientation of their lives, the deepening of their spiritual resources, comfort in trouble, and rekindled zest for creative living.

In a vision, John Bunyon saw a man throwing water on a flame and yet the flame continued to burn. He wondered how it could burn on, until he saw that there was a man behind the door pouring oil on the flame. Jesus promised that his followers would be baptized "with the Holy Spirit and with fire." And, sure enough, we are told that on the day of Pentecost it was as if tongues of fire came to rest upon the heads of the apostles. Today, 2000 years later, despite countless attempts to extinguish it, that flame still burns in the heart of the Church and in the hearts of believers everywhere.

Through the community of the baptized, the Holy Spirit touches individual lives. And we are bound together and set on fire and driven to worship through the power of the Spirit at work among us. The Holy Spirit is at work within the Church and always has been. He is renewing the Church, illuminating her mind and enlivening her praise so that she may perform the service to which she is being constantly called and constantly sent.