

Pentecost: June 5, 2022

All Saints', Littleton, NH

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Acts 2: 1-21

Psalm 104: 25-35, 37

Romans 8: 14-17

John 14: 8-17, 25-27

Today, the feast of Pentecost, is, as we say, the birthday of the church. This is the day when we celebrate the Holy Spirit coming in power upon the disciples that 'quicken' them in the Spirit and gave the gumption and the confidence to live out the truth that Jesus taught them.

Allow me to give you a little historical and biblical context for the day. This event captured in the beginning of the second chapter of Acts was actually first a Jewish holiday. It was one of the three mandatory pilgrimage holidays in Judaism, the others being Passover and Sukkot, or the feast of tabernacles/booths. We just passed Passover around Easter and Sukkot is in the fall and partly celebrates the fruit harvest. The word Pentecost comes from Hellenistic Jews from the Greek word for fifty, because the feast day is fifty days after Passover. It is also known as the feast of weeks because of the counting of the seven weeks from Passover to Pentecost. Because it is one of the required pilgrimage festivals, the city of Jerusalem would have been filled with Jews from all over the Roman world. It also coincides with the grain harvest and is the first day that the faithful could bring the 'Bikkurim' (first fruits) to the temple. The idea here is that the offering to God from faithful Jews should be from the first of anything you harvest, not the last. For farmers they would take a reed and tie it around the first stalk that had grain heads form so they would be able to identify which was, in fact, the 'first fruit', and then make sure that stalk/plant/fruit was among the first to be harvested and then offered at

the temple. The harvest came from the seven things for which Israel was praised: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates.

It was on this feast that the Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples with great power. Now, it must be noted that the Spirit was already around and had been since the story recounted in Genesis. In Hebrew, the word is ruach, which can mean breath or wind also. And so the Ruach came like a mighty wind. But you will remember, as our gospel lesson tells us, the foretaste of this actually happened the night of the resurrection when Jesus 'breathed on them and said, 'receive the Holy Spirit' when he appeared to them in the upper room.

So in this upper room again, the Spirit came and lighted on them like tongues of fire. It is from this notion that the church celebrates this day with the color red – and also any other occasion where the Spirit is especially invoked: ordinations, confirmations, consecrations of bishops, etc. But it did not use to be so. For a long time in the Church of England the color used to be white, which is where a few old timers might remember the old fashioned name: 'Whitsunday', or 'white' Sunday.

So what of the signs and wonders of that day. The other great sign of the day was the 'speaking in tongues' – which in our own way we dramatized this morning at the 10 o'clock service with this lesson being read simultaneously in different languages. Scholars have debated what exactly happened that day and the text itself seems to give 2 different kinds of indications – one is that the disciples were suddenly able to speak different languages, ergo all the people from around the empire hearing their languages as the disciples proclaimed the gospel; or that it was what scholars call 'glossolalia' – or the ecstatic utterance of unknown speech/language that somehow in itself is a divine manifestation.

So this is the background for the day of Pentecost. But what of its meaning for us today. Do we feel the power of the Spirit infusing our lives and giving us power from on high? There is a branch of Christianity that believes so deeply in this power and the gifts of the Spirit that they have taken this day for their name – the Pentecostal churches. These churches

are known for their 'speaking in tongues'. Sometimes their worship can seem a little 'out there' for stayed old Episcopalians, but there is something to admire about how they live out their belief in the Spirit being active in their lives!

In each generation we have inherited the truth of the faith and a call to action. We may not have had an upper room experience, but we are called to live in the power of the Spirit which was given to us in our baptism. Part of our challenge is to be actively looking for it and inspiring it in our life and the lives of others; and be faithful to what we have inherited from our ancestors, and especially what we have inherited as adopted children of God, as our Romans lesson tells us.

We in the Episcopal church have been inheritors of a great tradition, with beautiful liturgy and music, sacred vessels and vestments; and we, in this place, have some of all of that as our inheritance. Yesterday I attended the ordination to the priesthood of Linda Moore, our seminarian last year. The service was full of our rich traditions around ordination and it was a lovely and powerful event in the cathedral church of Vermont. But the call of our faith, as this day reminds us, is not to our traditions with a small 't', but our tradition with a capital 'T'---living in the power of the Spirit for the glory of God. And the saints in heaven, my father and mother, and all our loved ones and ancestors, and all creation is watching. As in another part of this eighth chapter of Romans says: " For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God".

We, adopted by God, baptized in water and the Holy Spirit, are the living presence of Christ on earth –infused and inspired with the Holy Spirit. And not only Linda, but each of us has a ministry in this world, and by the power and grace of the Spirit we discern and live out our ministry and gifts we have been given our whole life through.

Join with me now as we renew this covenant as children of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, in reciting the Nicene Creed.