

2021-05-23 – Rev Esmā Collins-Marks

John 15:26-27,16:4b-15

I have here today a balloon - something that captures the essence of the day of Pentecost - the day that God poured out the Holy Spirit upon the very first church.

It is a pretty nice balloon I think. But something seems to be wrong with it - it doesn't bounce (drop) or float in the air. Can anyone tell me what is wrong with it???--- Yes – it needs air - it needs the breath of life.

On the day of Pentecost God breathed life into the church – by giving us the Holy Spirit. Before the people of the first church received the Spirit - they were sad and afraid - they believed in God - but something was missing. They didn't go anywhere. They didn't tell other people about Jesus. But on the day of Pentecost God did for the church what I just did for the balloon. He breathed life into it. The Holy Spirit is like the breath that is in the balloon - it allows a person to come fully alive to God and able to do and be all that he or she is meant to be.

Well, happy birthday to us! Traditionally, today, Pentecost, marks the beginning of the church. Many decorate with red balloons. Some have birthday cake at morning tea. It is a day of celebration, and a little awe that after the resurrection and ascension God finds this new way to be manifest among us.

The disciples are filled with the Spirit and for at least one moment people hear and understand. The disciples are filled with the Spirit and suddenly have the courage to do the preaching, teaching, and healing that created the Body of Christ, known as the Church. Since Easter we have been listening to the stories in the Book of Acts of the early church. These all happen after the story we heard today. Peter, who never quite got his sentences straight, becomes a central leader. John, who was known for acting a little too impetuously, becomes a consistent figure. After today, they have clarity and right courage. The work and vision that brings us to church this Sunday has begun.

But, of course, the power of the Spirit doesn't begin here. And if we take today to explore what it may indeed mean to have the Spirit acting in our life, we first need to remember that same Spirit has been acting since the beginning. When God calls forth for creation, it is the "wind" or "spirit" from God that sweeps over all -- a fact we are reminded of in the Psalm set down for today. "You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; and so you renew the face of the earth." [Ps. 104:31]

Big words - "created," "renew." So, is this what the Spirit is about? And how does an understanding of this strengthen our life in Christ, the life of the church? It is often useful as Christians to begin with the Gospel, so let's begin with our Gospel for today. In the Gospel we just heard, Jesus is making one of his post-resurrection appearances, and - weeks before today's Pentecost story - invokes the Spirit upon the disciples. Peace invokes reassurance; it is a place of comfort. After unexpectedly seeing their friend, strength and comfort is needed just so they can relate to him. One word sometimes used for the Holy Spirit is "the Comforter" or helper. Someone along side us in impossible times. And receiving the Holy Spirit, puts them in a place of renewal, re-creation if you like - or possibly even being made new, similar to the Spirit we are told about in Genesis. And finally there is a calling on wisdom for themselves as the disciples deal with others, since healing and recreation for all is part of the forgiveness of sins.

But as usual, it doesn't sound as if the disciples get it quite yet. And, as usual, Jesus' words are more complicated than they sound. Now Jesus was known for saying to people their sins were forgiven. Perhaps the best example is in Luke when some men lower their friend through the roof while he was teaching inside. First he tells the man his sins are forgiven. Then he heals him. [Luke 5:17-26] So is he really offering the disciples the same authority? Maybe. The passage is used as one reason for sacramental confessions. But it is more complicated, or, perhaps, simpler than that. Wisdom, another manifestation of the Spirit, is required. For, you see, it isn't just the effect of the sins on the person. There is also the truth that if one doesn't forgive - you personally, retain the affect of those sins. Strength is required to forgive, and it is only in this way that you are both free.

Think of someone you know who is angry because, let's say, someone once ignored them. So they never talk to that person again. Who are they hurting? Their not forgiving, hurts them as they continue to feed that anger a lot more than it hurts their former friend, who may be hurt, but is probably mostly confused. That's a fairly innocuous example, but like most "difficult" things in the Bible a little reflection shows it to be, simply true.

So, just in this story, we see the Spirit as creator or "renewer," a source of comfort and strength, and a place of wisdom and understanding. Sort of like the most basic of prayers: "Dear God, please make Nancy like me". "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." "God, help me understand algebra."

Our most basic prayers often are for someone who is ill or in a situation that really needs changing. We pray for healing or peace or to "renew a right spirit within us." The Spirit is manifest in renewal.

At other times, while we would often like to have things change, sometimes we know they aren't going to. A task that seems impossible must still be done. Someone we love has died. And the Comforter who gives strength, sometimes translated as "the advocate," but literally, "one called alongside for help," is there.

And then there is Wisdom - the prayer we make for knowledge and understanding, discernment, right judgment. This, too, is a manifestation of the Spirit at work.

But what does it mean for us today? What does this mean for you and me? Partly it means to be aware, to see the Spirit working in our lives. And it means becoming comfortable with that Spirit working and acting in our midst. Working and acting through our own words and deeds, when we allow it. Knowing that renewal, strength, and wisdom are available to us, to our church, and to our world. And trusting we will have the grace to recognize it in a breath or a red balloon, although, as we have heard, wind and fire has worked too. Amen.



