

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
May 31, 2009  
Pentecost Sunday  
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 2:1-11  
Psalm 33:12-15  
I Corinthians 12:4-13  
John 20:19-23

The events of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit are often presented in terms of great spiritual excitement and exuberance. And no doubt there was great excitement and exuberance on that day.

But if we are not careful, we might assume that the Spirit's work and activity is confined only to things like warm fuzzy emotions, spiritual ecstasy, and even miraculously speaking in other languages. Confining the Spirit's activity to these things alone, however, leaves us with an impoverished understanding of the third Person of the Holy Trinity.

The immediate context of our passages today, and our Scripture lessons from previous weeks, indicates some additional features of the work of the Spirit that can be important for us. I want to focus on one of those characteristics this morning.

Now we know that the coming of the Holy Spirit marks the birth of the Church. This is a given. But what we sometimes overlook is that the followers of Jesus who comprised the Church in its infancy were a *very* diverse group of people.

The followers of Jesus who were gathered in the upper room lived in a complicated world. Sometimes their dreams did not come true. They did not always get along with one another. These persons are our role models, yes. At times they behaved courageously and boldly. But at other times they were all too human. At times they were scheming, jealous, and selfish.

One feature of the Spirit's activity that I want to highlight for us this morning is that it is the Spirit who brings this diverse group of people together in such a powerful way that they become the Church. *They become corporately something that is more than the sum of their individual parts.* They experience *koinonia*, a word that is bandied about and loosely translated "fellowship," but where much of the meaning is lost.

Part of what this *koinonia* involves is shown to us in our epistle lesson. The Holy Spirit is the author of what can only be described as *unity amidst great diversity*. The people who comprise the Church are radically different, but it is the Holy Spirit who binds them together, works in their lives, and makes them one body in Christ. Their unity transcends age, gender, race, and nationality.

And yet the Spirit does this by operating differently from the power of the Roman empire. The Spirit's power resists the uniformity common to the empire. The Spirit, unlike the Roman empire's power, does not function as a centralizing and homogenizing power that makes everyone speak the same language. The

Spirit does not endorse the Roman empire's Latin or even the Jewish religious establishment's Hebrew. Rather, the Spirit enables a unique form of unity that does not eradicate diversity. Diverse groups of people understand what is going on *in their own languages*, in a way that respects their differences, traditions, and cultures.

Such is the work of the Spirit. The Spirit does not merely *give birth* to the Church and bring it into existence. The Spirit is the *unifying* Spirit, the power of God that works within people to make them one body, a fellowship of people that is led to the truth as it is revealed in Jesus.

On that Pentecost day long ago, the Scriptures tell us that 120 persons crowded into that upper room as a small community. Some were holding fast to Christ's departing words, and others were holding onto each other. What they were waiting for they knew only as words: *ruach*, the Hebrew term for "wind" or "breath." In Aramaic, *shekinah*, and in Greek *pneuma*.

They also had in mind promises of their prophetic forefathers like Jeremiah, Nehemiah, and Isaiah. But when the wind of God began to blow, and the tongues of fire descended upon them, this little group of people knew and experienced the reality of Pentecost in their own skin. They felt for themselves the same breath of God that blew over chaos in Genesis and parted the primordial waters.

That powerful breath of the Spirit transformed this little band of followers. They were bound together and made one in a way that made them more than the sum of their collective parts. The Spirit had bound them together in love, in a *koinonia* that transcended all of the things that made them different.

The result was that the world looked on and observed, “behold how they love one another” (Acts 2:42-47). The power of that love changed the world of those early followers of Jesus. The power of that love can work in us *today*, binding us together and working through us to make a difference in our world.

On this Pentecost Sunday, I wonder what would happen in our world if those of us in the church would recapture the focus not merely on the Spirit’s coming to bring the church into being, but on the power of the Spirit to bring unity from diversity, to make us ONE body in Christ, to make us more than the sum of our collective parts.

In coming to the Lord’s Table this morning, let us rejoice that Christ was true to his promise not to leave us as orphans. The Holy Spirit has come to us, to dwell within us, and to help us to continue Christ’s work in the world. Let us come seeking his grace this day, that we might embrace the Spirit’s work in our lives and in the life of Christ’s Church.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.