

**Pentecost (Whit Sunday); Year "A" [RCL]:** Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104 25-35, 37; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23

**Title:** Receive the Holy Spirit

I once read of a Passion Play that was produced and staged in a local church of a small town. Jesus was played by a truck driver -- a big, burly guy who looked like if he were not a truck driver, he might have just as easily earned his living as a lumber jack or some other brawny profession. The-truck-driver-turned-actor had been tried before Pilate, was wearing a plastic crown of thorns and was being led away to Golgotha.

He was doing his best to really get into his role and to be a convincing Jesus.

The owner of the local Jewelry store was playing the part of a Roman Centurion. And like Jesus, he too, wanting to do his best, was really getting into his part.

When Jesus came by, the jeweler-turned-Centurion jeered at him and mocked him. He struck him with the shaft of his spear and being true to the text he even spat on Jesus.

Well, play or no play, this was more than the truck driver could stand. He turned to the man playing the centurion and in a low voice that only the two of them could hear he vowed, "I'll be back to deal with you after the Resurrection!" And although we do not know how that turned out, we do know that Jesus did return to "deal with" his disciples following his resurrection - Not to deal with them as the truck driver had vowed to deal with the centurion, but rather to continue to instruct the disciples on what it would mean to be an Apostle in a Post-Resurrection world.

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For about ten days the Apostles had been in waiting, assembled with certain women as well as Jesus' brothers. Waiting. The text says that they were constantly devoting themselves to prayer. And then Jesus appeared to them. Over the next forty days there will be other appearances as well. And Jesus has told them they were to receive power when the Holy Spirit would come upon them. And after that, they would be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem. But not only in Jerusalem but also in Judea and Samaria, and [even] to the ends of the earth.

But now we have arrived at this day --the day we call Pentecost -- a Greek word meaning, "fiftieth," a reference to the fifty days beyond Easter. A day corresponding to the Jewish festival of the Feast of Weeks.

The Apostles and friends are gathered when suddenly there came a sound which we are told is like the rush of a violent wind. "A violent wind," says the text. Not a gentle breeze, not a gentle wisp

of a wind, but a violent wind, and it "filled the entire house." And then tongues of fire appeared and rested on each of them.

This is quite a scene. And, no doubt, had not Jesus prepared them for this moment, this group of Apostles and disciples would, no doubt, have been terrified. And, no doubt, once they had gained their composure, they might very well have said, "So, we have been filled with the Holy Spirit. But so now, what do we do with it?"

And so the day has arrived. It's sort of graduation day for the Apostles. For it was on this day that the apostles and those who were with them -- men and women who had been followers of Jesus -- received what had been promised. They received the gift of the Holy Spirit..

Someone once said that Easter raised Christ from the dead. Well, if that is true – and it is – then Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit raised the disciples from their time of waiting; waiting for the power of the Holy Spirit to be visited upon them. But they had waited, and they were prepared, such that they did not have to ask, "So, now what do we do with this gift of the Holy Spirit." For them it was like fire, and it was like a mighty rushing wind. It was that which would animate their ministry; animate their relationship with God, and animate them as they moved now into the world to do the work they had been given to do.

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When I was but a little boy of maybe eleven or twelve, we were living on the Georgia coast. And the news reports told of a hurricane that would possibly hit our little town as it would be travelling up the eastern seaboard. A time to take cover? No sir ree. Not me! For me it was an invitation to get on my bicycle and with the winds from the incoming storm allow myself to be literally propelled down the street that ran in front of our house and to do so at some pretty impressive speeds. I had a great time! Some might have thought me to be in some danger, going down the road on a bicycle but at speeds more like that of a motorcycle. But for me, though the whole enterprise held a modicum of risk, the rewards, the thrill of the thing made it all very much worthwhile.

Well, maybe it was something not unlike that kind of power that moved these early Christians to go out into the streets to proclaim God's deeds of power and to do so in a miraculous way. And it was the surge of this same Spirit that pushed the church out of the upper room in Jerusalem and into the world.

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There is an interesting aspect of the reports of this first day of Pentecost. The text says of a certain crowd that day each heard the message in his or her own native language even though those doing the speaking were speaking in what was to them a foreign language. The conventional interpretation of that scene is that somehow, that is to say 'through the Spirit,' those who had received the Spirit spoke in languages not their own. But it occurs to me that it might have been more that the hearers were hearing with 'new' ears more than were the speakers speaking with 'new' tongues. I don't know, but something happened that day. Something quite extraordinary. And that something launched the Christian church. And it changed the world.

One more point. I know that we Episcopalians can be a little leery of this notion of 'Gifts of the Spirit. For example, in today's account we have this business of speaking in unknown languages. This is not the same thing as speaking in tongues, but it certainly is a first cousin. This might tend to make some of us a little nervous. I mean the Holy Spirit is fine as long as it is quiet and subdued.

And Pentecost -- Isn't that the root for the term Pentecostal. And do we not tend to find Pentecostalism a little too ecstatic for our liking. It may just be that different folk are simply inclined to encounter the Holy Spirit in different ways. But the truth is even though we might find Pentecostals, with its manifestations of the Spirit, to be coloring a little too far outside the lines, some of the Pentecostals I've known seem to think that we Episcopalians are a pretty odd bunch ourselves.

But with that said, what makes us a little uneasy, of course, is that ecstasy, that is to say rejoicing in the Spirit can get out of hand. And indeed it can – a thing that no less than the Apostle. Paul spoke about. Paul cautioned the Corinthians to reject the speaking of tongues if it disrupted the worshipping community, or it resulted in arrogance, or excessive pride. Paul was in essence saying that ecstasy in the Spirit can be a good thing if it empowers, but not so efficacious if it overwhelms.

So, be of good cheer. Experiencing or having joy in Christ does not mean that we have to alter our worship.

It doesn't mean that we need abandon our wonderful and marvelously constructed liturgy.

And it doesn't mean that we need to burn our Prayer Books.

And it doesn't mean that we need to apologize for canon, or creeds, or episcopal polity.

But it does point to something we might call the **animation of structure** that is so prevalent and so woven into, and so much in evidence in our worship. Dear ones know this, embrace this, celebrate this: The Holy Spirit not only CREATES the structure of our worship, the Holy Spirit breaths the breath of God into it and gives it life, purpose, and meaning such that it can then animate Christ's influence on and in our lives.

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Finally, I want to suggest that the key to Paul's teaching this day is to be found in the phrase: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit **for the common good.**" Yes, the individual might receive some benefit from a gift whether that be the gift of wisdom, or of healing, or a prayer language of tongues, or administration, or teaching. But the point of the gift is never solely, or even primarily, for the benefit of the individual. Rather, it is intended for the benefit of the whole community -- for the common good. A particular gift is but a part of the whole as one body part is but a part of the whole body.

And I think that Paul's list of spiritual gifts is not exhaustive. There are *these* gifts and many more. We each bring certain gifts to the church and therefore to the spreading of God's Kingdom. In an optional Collect this morning, we would have prayed together that God would "shed abroad the gift

of the Holy Spirit throughout the world." God could, of course, choose whomever God wants to accomplish this 'shedding and spreading,' but among others, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, God has chosen you and me.

Through the agency of the Holy Spirit, each one of us, in our baptism, was not only taken into Christ but became a sacrament of Christ's real presence in the world. Such is the nature of our baptismal covenant.

God gives us many gifts and there is no one here, no not one, who is not been blessed many times over with much that we need to be thankful for. But of all our many blessings none is of more value than the gift of God's presence among us, and of his Son our Lord, and of the Holy Spirit which continues to dwell in and among us.

May God's name be praised for that. And may God's name be praised that true to his word, Jesus did return to "deal with us" after the resurrection. And through the mighty power of the Holy Spirit remains with us and among us, not only this day, but till the end of time. *Amen.*