

Day of Pentecost – May 27, 2007
Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV
1 Corinthians 12:4-13 – Varieties of Gifts

The Rev. Kent Higgins

One of the benefits of preaching from a lectionary, that is to say from a group of specified Scripture readings, is that the preacher is pretty much forced to address a variety of topics. Our lectionary is arranged according to the calendar of the church year, which is itself a teaching tool.

On this day, we celebrate what some call “the birthday of the church.” Pentecost commemorates the gift from God of the third member of the Trinity, that is the Holy Spirit, and next Sunday we will observe Trinity Sunday, that annual opportunity to try to explain the inexplicable! So we’ll wait until then to deal with the complexities of that holy mystery.

We use red as the color for Pentecost – red to remind us of the tongues of flame that were said to dance on the heads of those receiving the spirit. Another symbol is that of the dove – the spirit descending. We know the Holy Spirit by many names, but for the most part all of them have to do with inspiration – breathing in – taking in the breath of life.

It is easy to think of the Holy Spirit as some kind of poor cousin to the other two. God the Father and God the Son get most of the press, but in truth it’s God the Holy Spirit we call on when there’s a need for some heavy lifting. Part of the mystery of the Trinity is that each of the members is the equal of the other and of the others, but each is, at times, more needed than the others.

One way to look at the power of the spirit is to realize that the apostles spent more than two years in the company of Jesus. They witnessed his baptism; his

transfiguration on the mountain and his appearance with Moses and Elijah; they heard God refer to Jesus as his son; they journeyed with him and saw people healed and raised from the dead; and yet... . And yet, even after all of that, they didn't quite understand.

Those mortals, men and women – for indeed there were many women among Jesus' inner circle – had the greatest teacher of all time, but they didn't "get it." And to the extent they sometimes did really understand what was going on, they weren't able to do much with it independently.

You know, we're just like them, just like the apostles. Without the divine spark of the Holy Spirit, we waltz through our lives, not accomplishing much, not quite knowing what we're supposed to do. Sometimes I fear that we Episcopalians are our own worst enemies. Some are so convinced that maintaining proper decorum is essential, that it inhibits the Spirit. I have a book I enjoy very much, written as a priest's handbook back at the beginning of the last century, and its title says it all: "Decently and in Good Order."

Without doubt, the priest who wrote that book would have been viewed by his contemporaries as "sound," and can there be higher praise? Well, as a matter of fact, there can be.

For example. At last year's diocesan convention, I watched the Praise Team from Alderson¹, and wondered what they were thinking about us, as they told their stories, gave their testimony, sang their songs. And all us folks just sat there. Well, eventually some of us stood up, and did a little dance, and clapped our hands, but it was an effort!

¹ The Federal women's prison at Alderson, West Virginia. The prison chaplain is an Episcopal priest.

Now lest you worry that I've been fooling you these past months, pretending to be a fairly calm and conservative fellow, but really just biding my time until I can introduce Power Point presentations into the sermons, or dancing in the aisles, have no fear. I'm not likely to do any of that. "Decently and in good order" sounds pretty good to me.

But you know I do worry that some are so far removed from those men and women at Pentecost, those who, suddenly and ecstatically filled with the Holy Spirit, began to dance about. I worry that we have shut out an element of spontaneous joy from our lives. We have, or at least some of us have, or maybe none of us has but we know someone somewhere who has, kind of shut out the possibility of joy, of singing and dancing, of speaking to one another about what we really feel and really believe. Maybe at times we are so worried about being safe, about doing the right thing, about not being seen to be vulnerable in any way, that a spark goes out of our lives.

If it ever seems to you that this happens, then I invite you to take the gift of Pentecost into your hearts. Those tongues of flame can dance within each of us, and bring us the joy of Christ, the joy of God, the joy of being who we really are.

We don't have to take up shouting in church, but an occasional vigorous "Amen!!" would be OK. To be truthful, I think that Ascension Episcopal Church is really a very good place to see the Holy Spirit in action. Gail and I have felt welcomed here in a wonderful way, meaning literally that we are awed by it. You see, encountering the Holy Spirit at work is truly memorable, truly inspiring. It rubs off on everyone in the area, and I think that is happening here.

But for those who at times seek to bridle their enthusiasm, to maintain a solemn appearance instead of letting go and living the joyous life God has given us, I offer this poem by Joyce Rupp entitled "inside each of us."

inside each of us
there awaits
a wonder
full
spirit of freedom

she waits
to dance
in the rooms
of our heart
that are closed
dark and cluttered

she waits
to dance
in the spaces
where negative feelings
have built barricades
and stock-piled weapons

she waits
to dance
in the corners
where we still do not believe
in our goodness

inside each of us
there awaits
a wonder
full
spirit of freedom

she will lift light feet
and make glad songs
within us
on the day
we open the door of ego
and let the enemies
stomp out²

² Joyce Rupp, *The Star in My Heart*, Sandiego, 1990, p 61 quoted in Robert Atwell, *Celebrating the Seasons*, Morehouse Publishing, 2001, p 290.

