



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Calvary Episcopal Church
Pentecost, Year C, June 9, 2019

In the name of God: the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sanctifier. AMEN.

Pentecost wasn't a new "holiday" but had been around for centuries. Originally it was called Shavuot, which in Hebrew means seven weeks and was celebrated seven weeks, about 50 days, after Passover. Each year Jerusalem was packed with out of town visitors during those long 50 days, and I always wonder if one reason there was such rejoicing on this particular holy day was that all the relatives finally were leaving town. (There could be a bit of projection in that hermeneutic.) Hellenistic Jews in the years leading up to the time of Jesus began to call it Pentecost, which means 50th. So it was an easy transfer for these emerging Christians, most of whom were Hellenistic Jews, to transfer the celebration to 50 days after Easter. Today's lesson from Acts is the story of the first Christian Pentecost, which over the years came to be understood as the "birthday of the church."

But what do such stories mean to us? Episcopalians, not known for being highly emotional, don't exactly roll about in the spirit; speaking in tongues for most of us means ordering a meal in an Italian or French restaurant—usually poorly more than it means anything spiritual; and for absolute sure, nobody has ever witnessed our joyousness in worship on Sunday morning and thought us drunk. So is it all just an interesting narrative, one of many that we hold dear but one that remains largely impotent in our lives? This year particularly it is important for me to contemplate the power of this mysterious spirit, for how it sustains us in times of individual pain and crisis but also to think about how it moves us as a people toward that which is life changing in ways beyond what we can imagine. It is important to acknowledge that though we are no longer nascent Christians, we are not terribly different from those on this first day. We are as motley as they were, our fears and doubts, different from theirs, but just as pervasive. They were a mess; we are a mess—equally in need of a new dose of that spirit-filled wind to empower us. Could that be our experience?

Sometimes when I look at what the church has become, i.e., what **we** have become because **we** are the church, not these walls or these accoutrements, sometimes when I look, my heart is heavy. The sad truth is that we have created and recreated this great and wondrous vessel of God's grace in the world, the church, making it again and again to reflect our needs, our fears, and our hopes. We have abused people; we have deliberately and unkindly kept some out; we have acted as though we are the only ones really loved by God. And, yet, while all of that and much more is true, today is Pentecost; and there is nowhere else on earth I would rather be than right here right now, standing in an imperfect church celebrating this founding day and hoping for a brighter tomorrow. I don't remember which Shakespearean character made this remark about his horse; and, in fact, I may be making the whole thing up. But as I recall it, Falstaff, I think, said of his horse, "She is a sorry mare, but she is mine." I often feel that way about the church; she lumbers and stumbles and fails to deliver; but by God, she is mine, and more importantly I am hers: I know the comfort of her cradle and the tug of her imperative. For me it unmistakably remains the best chance I have to live in a community of people who recognize that much of what **is** is not seen and that the material, no matter how good it gets (which is often really good), is never enough.

The whole world knows religions' shortcomings, some tragic and some just petty and stupid; but today is Pentecost, and I am not talking any more about our troubles. Today I want to tell you what keeps me coming back again and again.

- At times the church is like our mother, a source of comfort that we cannot find elsewhere. So many times in my life as a priest, I have stood alongside people in the midst of stunning tragedies that seemed to be beyond bearable. Though numbed by shock, these heartbroken journeyers have turned toward the church—not ultimately in hopes of magical deliverance but in the certainty of being sustained. Refusing silly words of cheap resolution, they have clung to the mysterious hope that God, though not the originator of tragedy is also no stranger to it and that God's imperfect creation, the church, in its words, its liturgy, its moments of silence holds for us, allowing us a shared journey without which we simply could not survive. That keeps me coming back.
- In an era of civilization that is dangerously individualistic and nationalistic, when topping our personal and national best in work and play and everything else is *the* highest calling in our culture, the church is singularly (largely) a place that keeps on teaching that putting others first is more important than always winning. "Merit" is the word that counts in our culture; our merit determines what we deserve and shall have. Friends, the realm of God is not a meritocracy—mercifully. Our presence around this table is an extraordinary counterclaim to this prevailing "gospel of prosperity, achievement, and merit." In a few moments when we shuffle up to the altar before us, we arrive not as evidence of our merit, achievement, hard work; we crash to our knees or stand in the spirit of our bowed hearts to acknowledge our dependence upon God and one another. For me, this moment remains the most powerful conflation of the human and the divine. And through all these years of dragging myself up there, sometimes like a peacock but more often like a confused and lost little boy or now a stumbling old man, it still takes my breath away and keeps me coming back.
- After the experience of the Pentecost, the disciples went out into the world— not swept upward to heaven, as they perhaps had hoped to be, but outward into the world. They set out on dusty roads to encounter and love the downcast, the poor, and the oppressed; to bring reconciliation and peace to the arrogant and the hard of heart; to speak hope to those disheartened and embittered by the drudgery of their circumstances; and to live as symbols and makers of peace in a strife-ridden world. Often they stumbled and failed. But from that moment on up to and including this precious moment in time, the church remains called to that ambitious mission, and *sometimes* we actually deliver. The fact that the church holds that kind of purpose before me keeps me coming back again and again, reminding me what really matters.

This isn't just a whacky, outlandish story. It is the outline for how we are to live our lives as those who will follow Jesus. The spirit, we are promised, is around us and within us—and has been here all along. All that remains is our response: what on earth shall we do with it?

In the name of God. AMEN.