

Pentecost

Welcome to the Day of Pentecost! I love this pair of feast days, Pentecost and Trinity Sunday next week. They feel like we have completed another year in telling the story of Jesus, from birth to the death to resurrection to ascension to the coming of the Holy Spirit. We still have many Sundays after Pentecost in our liturgical year, of course, but I like the changes of seasons in the church that mirror the changes of the seasons outdoors. There's a sense of continuity and regularity amidst the world's uncertainty.

Sometimes this day is called the "birthday of the Church," as though Jesus' disciples were a disorganized group until the Holy Spirit showed up. I think that's a simplification. Pentecost is both deeper and more subtle than that. On this day people who "gathered from every nation under heaven" were astounded when they heard their own languages being spoken by Galileans. It's as though Pentecost reversed the chaos created at the Tower of Babel. Instead of a confused babble of languages, the saving message of Jesus Christ was understood by all.

The passage from Acts begins, "when the day of Pentecost had come." The New Testament names no other Christian festival. We don't find "the day of Christmas" or "the day of Easter" or even "the day of Resurrection." That's because Pentecost was originally a Jewish festival, celebrated as the day when God gave Moses the Law on Mt. Sinai. Since the apostles were still observing Jewish traditions, they gathered together for Pentecost.

What they did not expect was the remarkable power that came upon them. A rushing wind and tongues of fire appeared. Tongues of languages followed. The passage is quite clear that the apostles spoke in recognizable languages. Perhaps not all were intelligible, allowing scoffers to imply that they were speaking drunken gibberish. Peter set them straight. This was the fulfillment of prophecy, he said, spoken through the prophet Joel.

From our standpoint two thousand years later, it's hard to know exactly what happened. What we do know is that after the Holy Spirit arrived, Christianity exploded. On that very day three thousand persons were baptized. They all devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. If that phrase sounds familiar, it's because we still promise to do that (with God's help) in our own baptismal covenant.

The Holy Spirit's appearance was not only an external event, however. Paul says as much in his letter to the Romans. The Spirit that came on Pentecost bears witness with our spirit, Paul says, that we are children of God, joint heirs with Christ. When we listen carefully to our own spirit within, we are more likely to hear the Spirit of God.

That resonates with a book I've been rereading, Parker Palmer's *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. Written nearly twenty years ago, it relates Palmer's experience with what he calls "circles of trust" – small groups in which people listen to one another without judgment or advice, creating a safe space in which our "shy souls," as he puts it, can emerge. Even though quiet circles of trust are the opposite of the boisterous activity that we imagine from the description in the Acts of the Apostles, it is the same Spirit that speaks.

It's critical that we hold in tension both ways in which the Holy Spirit works – the outward energy and enthusiasm that we hear about in Acts, and the inward voice that aligns our spirit with God's. Only if we live out of that center where God is, where our “shy soul” lives, will we have the strength and courage and authenticity to speak the word of God out loud to others. That's when the vision of Joel really comes true, when *all* God's people prophesy.

You may not think of yourself as a prophet, and you may not want to be one. But there's no question that the Holy Spirit already speaks within you, even now. Sometimes it takes silence to hear; sometimes the words of the Spirit come through someone else close to you. Remember what Paul said – we are children of God, all of us, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. The remarkable power that came upon those disciples on the Day of Pentecost is available to you. Even if you don't speak in other languages, you can still tell others what God has done for you. Trust the Spirit, and you'll be amazed at what you can accomplish.

[Pentecost: Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104; Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-17, 25-27.]