

The Gift of the Holy Spirit

Sermon preached at St. Peter's Cathedral in Helena, Montana

Pentecost, May 20, 2018

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Good morning! It is hard to preach a sermon after our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry preached such a marvelous sermon on the redemptive power of love at the Royal wedding yesterday!

Today we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, the day when Jesus' promise of giving the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church and to every member of the Church, was fulfilled. Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit in his last conversation with his disciples prior to his departure when he ascended into heaven. Jesus keeps his promises. On that first Pentecost, Jesus fulfilled what he promised. The Holy Spirit was poured out on the church in great power and the same Holy Spirit is with us, empowering the church to this day.

In our Bible study last Monday, as we prepared for this day, we observed that this story of Pentecost not only spoke of the Holy Spirit spreading the church all over the world, it also spoke personally to individual disciples. As Michael Curry reminded us yesterday, the Holy Spirit is the redemptive power of love, Christ's unconditional love, a love that is not selfish but sacrificial.

We have heard the story from 'Acts' in several languages. The gift of the Holy Spirit empowered Jesus' disciples to speak in the native tongues of all the people in the known world. In the future, the Holy Spirit would convert people of many more languages across the world down to our present day. It is an historic fact that the church would spread just as Jesus said it would. It is irrefutable and we should take the time on this day to remember that. Jesus instructed his disciples in his last conversation with them 10 days before, when he ascended to heaven, that they would be witnesses, first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria and unto the uttermost parts of the earth. All this was to happen through the conversion of countless disciples. Jesus' instruction was not only obeyed, it was fulfilled. Those of us who sit here in this church right now, today are irrefutable proof of the power of Jesus' Holy Spirit to guide the church into all truth, to remember all that Jesus taught and to bring to fulfillment His plan for the

salvation of the world. This is not fancy theology. This is simple historic truth. The church grew as Jesus promised.

The growth of the Church all over the world is the first lesson which we can take from the record we have heard from the Book of Acts.

But there is also a political lesson for us to appreciate as well. What began in Jerusalem on that first Pentecost has continued in spite of every effort by every hostile power, to stop the movement of the church across the world. Jesus had been crucified by the hands of the Roman empire, the most powerful empire previously known. Over the next 400 years the Holy Spirit would grow the church in spite of persecutions, martyrdom and making spectacles of Christians in public forums when they refused to give their highest loyalty to the emperor. Their faith was that Jesus is Lord, not that Caesar is Lord. A famous theologian named Tertullian gave us the oft quoted proverb, that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”.

It is an historic fact that Rome fell. It is also an historic fact that the church not only survived Rome, it replaced Rome. The love of power was replaced by the power of love. The Holy Spirit spread the church across the dark continent of Europe thanks in large measure to several monastic movements which preached the gospel of Jesus, cared for the poor, guarded the treasures of western civilization, educated centuries of clergy and baptized Christians, provided hospitals for the sick and gave hospitality to the stranger. From the dark continent of Europe, missionary movements would spread across every continent and isle, every language and nation and every color of skin, all because Jesus left his Spirit to guide his church into all truth against all efforts to defeat her.

The Holy Spirit grew the church down through history. The Holy Spirit was also active and alive in the soul of every baptized Christian. But we all need some teaching and practice in discerning what the Spirit is saying to us. We have not done a very good job in the church of educating Christians to understand the work of the Spirit in their own lives and the lives of others. We seem to talk more easily about God the creator and Jesus as the Son of God, but the work of the Holy Spirit seems to get less attention in our understanding of how the Spirit works in us and for us.

The Holy Spirit is the very life of Jesus implanted in us at our baptism. Our job is to discern the will of the Spirit for our lives and to follow it. How would we know whether we are following Jesus' Spirit or following another false Spirit? In the fourth chapter of John's First Letter, he warns us, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God." Testing the spirits to discern the Holy Spirit from a false spirit is a central discipline for every disciple.

Fortunately, there are some basic principles which can be followed to help us discern God's will. For one thing, our prayer life should always be accompanied by a life of scripture reading. Reading scripture is a basic spiritual discipline. There are many things we can learn about the will of God which can be known from the reading of scripture! Sometimes we know very well from Scripture what the Holy Spirit is saying, but we just do not want to hear it! A major discipline in discerning the Holy Spirit is being immersed in the Bible as the inspired Word of God. When we read the bible we often discover that the bible is reading us and speaking to our condition.

Another criterion for discerning the Holy Spirit in making a decision is peace, a deep inner peace. We may only come to a deep inner peace after a period of testing and struggle. An example of this happened to me many years ago when I was asked by a parishioner what I thought about him taking a certain job that he was being offered. As he explained his situation, I noticed that he seemed very intense, almost manic. When he finished describing the context of his decision, I said to him what was hard for me to say, but I knew was true. I said to him, I don't like saying this to you, because it might upset you, but you do not seem at peace about this decision. You seem very agitated and anxious. Years later he told me what was really going on with him at the time. He was unhappy with his job and was ready to take any offer, just to escape from his job. He went home that day and turned down the offer. A short time later he received a much better offer that completely changed his career path and started him on a direction that bore fruit beyond anything he could have ever imagined.

When we are trying to discern the Holy Spirit, it is important to guard against feelings of escape. The Holy Spirit would want us to face what is not right in our work, rather than avoid what is not right in our work. We should only change jobs when we are going from strength to strength, rather than trying to escape.

Another criterion for discerning the will of God which I have experienced many times over the course of my life is the element of surprise! Sometimes we receive information about a decision which we did not initiate but may have some bearing on a decision we need to make. Information we did not initiate can be the Holy Spirit speaking to us. Our God is a God of surprise who will give us information in ways we did not anticipate.

The Holy Spirit is the life of Jesus imbedded in our souls. It is Christ's love directing us, challenging us, healing us and reconciling us to accomplish the will of God for us. As disciples, we are called to seek the will of God and follow it. God is for us. God always advocates for us. The Holy Spirit is the love of Christ guiding and growing us and the church. The Holy Spirit is the power of love overcoming the love of power as God establishes his Kingdom.

On this day of Pentecost, as we hear about God's gift of the Holy Spirit to the church and to us, may we continue to grow in our understanding of Jesus' Spirit at work in us, may we make room for the will of God to have its way with us, so that our lives may flourish, the church may be built up and Jesus Christ glorified.

Amen

The Very Rev. Graham Smith, Interim Dean