

Sunday, May 20 and Wednesday, May 23 + Day of Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21, John 15:26-27

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI

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The Day of Pentecost is that occasion 50 days after Easter on which we remember the great drama of the Holy Spirit being given to disciples, as told in Acts 2. Violent wind suddenly rushing onto the scene. Tongues of flame popping up on the heads of the disciples as they burst into speech in many different languages that, mysteriously, all the travelers gathered in Jerusalem can understand in their own tongue.

But what does the giving of the Holy Spirit mean? What does the Spirit do?

To start, let's zoom in on the present.

Jesus says to his disciples, "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. ²⁷You also are to testify."



You also are to testify. You...and you already are. Each of you is testifying to the Holy Spirit simply by your presence here. Because you got up intending to come here to church. Because you got dressed, got the kids ready, drove, parked. Because you came in, where you were warmly greeted and handed a bulletin. Because you found a seat and began to worship.

You are here because the Spirit, also known as the Advocate, called you here. The

Holy Spirit enlivens our faith. Your faith would be inert, held in suspension, if the Holy Spirit did not call it into action—not only in coming here this morning but in everything you do that brings God’s love into our needy world. The Holy Spirit fills you with special gifts for God’s service and draws those out of you so that each of you, in your own way, proclaims the risen Christ and the victory of life over death. In this way the Holy Spirit is God’s agent of action in the world.

Now, let’s zoom out to the beginning of time. Recall the first two verses of Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”

This is the same Spirit, the word for which in Hebrew translates as “breath.” God’s breath hovered, fluttered, trembled over the vast watery depths. It was this breath that brought light into being, that brought the sky into being, that brought into being dry ground, vegetation, the stars, and all living creatures, including humans.

God’s breath also brought the Word into being in the form of Jesus Christ as he entered space and time. All things happen through the Spirit: Luke 1:35 tells us that Jesus was conceived in Mary’s womb when the power of the Holy Spirit came upon her. The beginning of Mark’s Gospel says that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness immediately after his baptism. In Acts 10 Peter testifies that the Holy Spirit equipped Jesus for all that he did in his earthly ministry. As Paul says in Romans 8:11, it was the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. And in Acts, we have the Spirit breathing life into the early community of Christians in a violent rush of wind, as Christ’s church on earth is born.

The Spirit enabled the disciples to do amazing things, which are related in the Book of Acts. The people of today's church can also do amazing things, too, if they are willing to let the Spirit run free as those first disciples did. So much that is going badly with institutionalized church has to do with ways in which the Holy Spirit is being stifled, even



suffocated, by human pride and arrogance.

What if the people of Christ's church could learn to discern the movements of the Spirit and try to simply stay out of the way?

Discerning what is the Holy Spirit and what isn't that hard. The middle verses of the John 15 reading address this. Basically, we can ask about

a given development or event: Is it consistent with the victory of life over death in the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Or is it an expression of sin, the turning away from God toward one's self?

I'm sure you all have stories of times in your lives when something unexpected happened, leading to a process that resulted in a wonderful, life-giving outcome that you never could have imagined. I can think of any number of things—how a blind date led to me becoming Lutheran, oh yes, and to a marriage of three decades and two wonderful children; how a series of unlikely circumstances led us from Milwaukee through Birmingham, Alabama, of all places, to Columbus, Ohio, where there just happened to be a Lutheran seminary across the street from my husband's school; or the sheer audacity of me even applying to seminary, I, who had never even had a religion course and knew the Bible only from teaching it to Sunday School preschoolers. (It was all I could do to stay one

step ahead of them.)

Now think of your own experiences. What if you had shut things down from the moment of the first surprise, because that wasn't what you had in mind, or you thought it didn't make sense, or you didn't want to lose control of what was happening? For me, what if I'd said no to person who was trying to arrange our blind date? Actually, I did say no, which made her almost beg. I still remember that: "Pleeeeeeaaase..." Or, what if I'd told myself it was crazy to even think of applying to a Lutheran seminary when I had so little background?

Unlike those first disciples, you may not be performing miracle healings. But the Holy Spirit is very much alive in each of you. It is swirling around you and through you in ways that are, to my mind at least, wild, unpredictable, and exciting. In fact, I am coming to see my role more as one who is simply trying to remove obstacles that might be in the way of the Holy Spirit moving through each of you. To that end, I offer this great Pentecost prayer:

Come Holy Spirit,
fill the hearts of your faithful people,
and kindle in them the fire of your love.
Send forth your Spirit
and they shall be created.
And You shall renew the face of the earth.