

“Come Holy Spirit”
1 Corinthians 12:4-13
Pentecost Sunday
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Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

Veni sancte spiritus! Come Holy Spirit!

The story in Acts 2 of the disciples receiving the Holy Spirit is a vibrant and fantastical one. After Jesus ascends into heaven, the disciples are left hanging out on earth, and I imagine they have a lot of questions. What did it mean that Jesus had told them the Holy Spirit would come to them, that a Comforter would be with them, that an Advocate would accompany them after he was no longer with them in body?

The disciples didn’t have to wait long, as soon after the Ascension, they gathered in one place and a sacred wind blew through their midst, something like the breath of God. And something like tongues of flame appeared above their heads, and the disciples were able to speak in different languages. Of course, the people in the vicinity were confused, because the disciples were all Galilean, and yet people from diverse places—from Egypt to Mesopotamia to Rome—were hearing the disciples preach in their own native language.

And thus, the Church (Big “C”) was born, as the disciples of Jesus called the Christ spoke about him and his teachings and God’s love—and despite the diversity of hearers, all were able to receive the gospel. Surely, the Holy Spirit caused miraculous things to happen, enabling this small band of Galileans to speak so that people from all over the world would know the relevance of the gospel for their own lives.

But what about us, today, gathered here? What does Pentecost have to do with us? Why does the Holy Spirit matter to us? For us, here in Seattle First Baptist Church, what significance does this story have for our real lives?

The Holy Spirit is perhaps the most esoteric member of the Trinity, by which many Christians understand the Divine. God has the role of the Creator, and throughout time attributes like omnipotence and omnipresence have been ascribed to Them. Then there’s Jesus, the Son, the Special Child of God, embodied as a human being who walked and talked on the Earth at a specific time and in a specific place in human history. Then there’s the Holy Spirit—who likes to do surprising things like blow and bluster through a home and shockingly dare to light people’s hair on fire? Confusing. Weird.

But the Holy Spirit is also the one that is the main character in the book of Acts—enlivening the apostles’ speech and accompanying them as they discern what to do as messengers of a fledgling religion. The Holy Spirit is closely related to Wisdom, to that creative power that John 1 says was with God in the beginning of all things. The Holy Spirit is what many preachers, myself included, feel with us as we prepare to preach and teach and minister—She shows up as that little

nudge to say the good and hard and brave thing, or the call to pay attention to what God is doing at a particular moment.

And the Holy Spirit is the one who bestows “spiritual gifts.” Hear what 1 Corinthians 12 has to say about spiritual gifts.

4 Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, 5 and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jewish people and Greeks, those who were enslaved and those who were liberated--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Spiritual gifts—not just talents, like tap dancing or being good at spelling or playing the best game of chess in the world. Spiritual gifts are more than a talent or a skill you have—they are something that makes you *YOU*, something that you contribute to a community that makes a community better, stronger, and more loving.

And before you scoff and turn away thinking, “yeah, right, I don’t have anything like that,” let me stop you. Yes, you do. There is something about you, yes, you, that you bring to any space you are in, that only you can contribute. It’s not necessarily something you learn over time, but something much deeper in your heart and soul.

In his important small book *Let Your Life Speak*, Quaker teacher Parker Palmer wrote about witnessing his granddaughter as a baby grow into her “birthright gift of self.” He says, “She did not show up as raw material to be shaped into whatever image the world might want her to take. She arrived with her own gifted form, with the shape of her own sacred soul. Biblical faith calls it the image of God in which we are all created. Thomas Merton calls it true self. Quakers call it the inner light, or ‘that of God’ in every person. The humanist tradition calls it identity and integrity. No matter what you call it, it is a pearl of great price.”¹

And so each of us has a gift bestowed by the Holy Spirit to use for the common good. Discernment, knowledge, wisdom, healing, miracles, prophecy—these are some that were named two thousand years ago when the apostle Paul was inspired to tell this to the community at Corinth. Today, I think we’d add gifts of kindness, compassion, empathy, hospitality, generosity,

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caretaking, leadership, truth-telling, strategy, artistry, teaching...what else would you add, I wonder?

See, God is in the business of community building, and God knows that to make a beloved community, not everyone can have the same gift. Not everyone in a town can be a garbage collector or a mail carrier or a mayor, though all those jobs are important. Not all members of the orchestra can play viola, though it is a beautiful instrument. Not all members of a family can be the baby, though many may act like it. Ecology teaches us this truth as well—in nature there are producers, consumers and decomposers, and each have a role to play. As a plant-lover, I love the illustration of a garden: the plants produce, insects and animals consume, and fungi and bacteria decompose...this just brings me back to that sermon about the wonder that is composting because it shows us resurrection!

All these illustrations show us what the apostle Paul explained in 1 Corinthians: each of us has a gift, and we don't have to compare ourselves to others, or compare others' gifts to ours.

Church, this is one of those times when I am acutely aware that I am preaching to myself. Comparing myself to others is one of the things I do best! (No, that is not a spiritual gift). It is so tempting to compare ourselves to others, especially in this capitalistic world that pressures us to prize victory and winning and being the best and doing the most.

Parker Palmer tells a story in *Let Your Life Speak* that will stick with me for a long time. When Rabbi Zusya, a Hasidic rabbi, was very old, he said "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'why were you not Moses?' they will ask me: 'why were you not Zusya?'"²

How tiring it is to go around the world wishing that we were like someone else—as beautiful, as gifted, as talented, as intelligent, as creative as *that person over there*. There are many preachers that I have wished I could be at times, many pastors about which I have thought, "Wow, if only I was like THEM in THIS way..." But I'm not Harry Emerson Fosdick or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or Jacqui Lewis or Amy Butler or Rod Romney or anyone else! I'm me, and that's ok. Good, actually. And it's good that you don't play soccer as well as Cristiano Ronaldo, that you're not as great a cellist as Yo Yo Ma, that you're not as skilled an actor as Meryl Streep, that you're not as skilled at service as Mother Theresa, that you're not as smart as Albert Einstein...how boring the world would be, how bland life would be if all of us had the same gifts. How much we would miss out on if we were all gifted in the same ways.

Again, God is in the business of community building—there are many roles in a community, and none of us can fill each other's roles. There is only one Norah Walker, and how magnificent that is! Only one Cherry Johnson! Only one Bob Sittig! Only one Larry Green! Only one David Greenhow! Only you can choose to be yourself every day. Only you can choose to live your life fully. Only you can use your gifts as given to you by the Holy Spirit, and fulfill your role in community for the common good. I know it's easier said than done, but I believe it is a beautiful goal: I hope that you will choose each day to be your true, whole self, and live expansively in the

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world. We are all better for it, because you are important and we need you to be you. Again, Parker Palmer: “One dwells with God by being faithful to one’s nature. One crosses God by trying to be something one is not.”³

And so what do we do now, knowing that each of us has a spiritual gift, something that has our own special flair and makes us ourselves—how do we discover it? Well, that is another role of community: when we live in community, when we know others and are known, those around us may come to witness our spiritual gifts in ways that are completely surprising to us! Sometimes it is easier to see others’ gifts than our own, and so we must practice reflecting gifts to each other. Saying, “I see that you are always so creative and thoughtful, Brent” or “the care with which you walk through nature is inspiring, Keith,” or “your entrepreneurial ideas about how to support organizations you care about have a lot of depth, Alex.” We need to know each other and spend time with one another so we can recognize the giftedness that dwells just below the surface in each of us.

No one is useless. No one has nothing to add. Every person among us, each created in the image of the Divine, has a place at the table—at our table—and we need you to be among us. We notice when you are not here. We need *you*, to be *us*.

When we are together, as a church dedicated to following the Way of Jesus, we have the opportunity to be aware of the Holy Spirit moving among us in a new way. The Scripture says that all spiritual gifts are to be used for the common good—and so to us today, what does that tell us? Our spiritual gifts, the gifts we are most acutely aware of when we are in community, are to be used to follow the Way of justice for all people. The equitable distribution of the Spirit on the disciples shows us that a celebration of Pentecost includes all of us, doing our part in the grand scheme of making the kin-dom of God reality among us.

So come, Holy Spirit! Alight over our heads the call to show up for our LGBTQIA+ siblings, and the creativity to make a way where there seems to be no way. Alight over our heads the vision to see where we can best use our resources as a gathered body of Your Church, so that we may be a presence of love in this neighborhood. Alight over our heads, Holy Spirit, and remind us of how encouraging each other’s individual giftedness benefits all of us so that we can learn and grow together.

And so friends, hear the good news on this flame- and wind- and breath-filled day: Even now, the Spirit is moving and speaking and dwelling with us. Even now, we may be moved in a way that we don’t anticipate, by a God who knows our capabilities beyond our wildest imaginations. Even now, you are being called to be your whole, true, beautiful self for the service of the Holy and the common good of all Creation.

May you listen to the Spirit’s call all your days, and may this community lean in closer together to help each other interpret those gifts of the Spirit. Amen.

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