

Pentecost Sunday
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
St. Francisville, Louisiana
20 May 2018

John , Acts 2:1-11

I know that many of you are surprised to see me here today. You may be wondering, “How did he get back from the royal wedding so quickly?” Sadly, I must inform you that I chose not to attend the wedding, even though I knew it would break the Queen’s heart if I missed. I chose to stay for three reasons: First, I just couldn’t find anything appropriate to wear. You know how it is! The second reason is that, after writing Bishop Curry’s sermon for him, I felt I had done my part already. There was no need for me to be there. But, the most important reason why I declined the invitation is that the wedding conflicted with our parish picnic. I knew there was no way to get back to Louisiana in time. So, I had no choice but to send my regrets. I hope the Queen will forgive me before I come to baptize the couple’s first child. I just don’t want the baptism to be awkward. Elizabeth can hold a grudge!

Anyway, I am glad I am here since today is Pentecost Sunday and I love this feast. So, let’s get to it and talk about the Holy Spirit. There is a difference in how Catholic and Anglo-Catholic traditions, on the one hand, and the Evangelicals, on the other, see the working of the Holy Spirit. For the Evangelicals Baptism in the Holy Spirit happens at some point in your adult life. You pray the sinner’s prayer at some revival, or perhaps you respond to an altar call, and the minister lays his hand on your forehead and prays for the Holy Spirit to come upon you. In some cases, you are “Slain by the Spirit.” In this tradition, you can go to church every week for years and not be saved, unless you have been baptized by the Holy Spirit. This baptism sometimes happens when you least expect it. I have read stories of people who are watching a revival on TV and, upon the preacher’s instructions, place their hand on the screen and, suddenly, they are overcome by the Spirit. When I read these stories I always think it is awesome that you can receive the Holy Spirit through your television. The only feeling I felt when I watch Joel Olsteen for half an hour is an overwhelming desire to buy a Mercedes Benz. No Spirit for me!

For the Catholic Traditions, the workings of the Holy Spirit are less an explosion that happens all at once, but rather a slow process of intervention in the life of the believer that starts at infant Baptism and continues over time. The Holy Spirit works in the first way, as we see in the reading from Acts today. On the day of Pentecost he exploded into the scene. The disciples saw tongues of fire, they were all moved to the core, and shaken to their foundation. They started at that point to preach the Gospel boldly and courageously. Prior to this event the frightened disciples were hiding in locked places for fear of the authorities. After this event, they were “on- fire”. They began to

boldly preach the Gospel with such enthusiasm and conviction that people though they were “drunk with new wine”. After this event, a purely local and somewhat exclusive enterprise becomes a universal church, as thousands of people from many different countries are able to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their own language, and take that message with them when they go back home. The Holy Spirit burst into the earthly stage and a young church became the vehicle through which God shared with the world the Good News of his Son, Jesus Christ, the only Savior of the human race.

The Holy Spirit also works in the second way, as we see in the reading from John today. In his farewell speech from which we have been reading these last few Sundays, Jesus promises that after he has ascended to heaven he will send the “Paraclete” to his disciples. The literal translation of “Paraclete” is “one who comes alongside”. Some have used it in a legal sense as someone who speaks for someone else, from which we get the word “Counselor”. But we should not understand the Holy Spirit as a “Counselor” in the sense of one who gives us advise or in the sense of a defense attorney. I personally like the expression, “One who comes alongside,” and one who accompanies us in our journey.

The Holy Spirit works like the slow burn of Gasoline. He is that steady source of power who is “with us forever” (John 14:16); who “teaches and reminds us of Jesus' words” (John 14:26); who “testifies and witnesses on Jesus' behalf” (John 15:26); and who “proves the world wrong about sin, righteousness, and judgment” (John 16:7-11). The Holy Spirit comes alongside the believers and gives them the courage to endure as they are hated by the same world that hated Jesus (John 15:18); a world to which they do not belong (John 15:19); and which will persecute them as they persecuted Jesus (15:20). “One role of the Paraclete is to be the presence of God/Jesus with the community. That presence is needed because the community is being hated and persecuted by the world” (Stoffregen, “Exegetical Notes”, www.crossmarks.com).

The Holy Spirit is the great explosion that has the power to ignite a life- saving belief in Christ (which is what I believe happens at Baptism), and the Holy Spirit is also the slow burn that allows us to initiate our journey of faith, protects us from the “Evil One”, and feeds us spiritually along the way. It is important we understand the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit does not place himself at the center of the stage, does not testify about himself, and does not witness to his own power. Rather, the Holy Spirit is like the stage lights that remain hidden during the production, but which illuminate and point to the main character in the story, which is Christ. The Theologian J. I. Packer states, “The Spirit's message to us is never, ‘Look at me; listen to me; come to me; get to know me’, but always, ‘Look at him, and see his glory; listen to him and hear his word; go to him and have life; get to know him and taste his gift of joy and peace.’ The Spirit, we might say, is the matchmaker, the celestial marriage broker, whose role it

is to bring us and Christ together and ensure that we stay together” (James Packer, “Your Father Loves You”, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986.)

I believe we make two grave errors when we speak of the Holy Spirit in the Church today. For some, the Spirit is leading us into new revelation and new truth. These churches encourage us to “listen to what the Spirit is telling his church” as though they are the recipients of some new revelation. You come to their church and they give you a tour of the sweat lodge they felt the Holy Spirit wanted them to build, right next to the Altar to Buddha, the Totem Pole, and the altar for the daily animal sacrifice, unless they are a Vegan church. My friends the truth the Holy Spirit leads us into is not, and can never be, repugnant to Holy Scripture. All truth has already been revealed. The new truth is really a deeper appreciation for the truth God already revealed through his Son, Jesus Christ. Yes, the Spirit is alive and leads us into wonderful ministry, but some times I feel the Holy Spirit is leading us into places the Holy Ghost never wanted us to go! All truth is centered on the reality of Jesus of Nazareth, and Holy Scripture remains the primary source to know the Gospel of the Savior of the World.

The other error we make is to become so fixed, so formulaic, so set in our ways, that our church becomes a boring routine. There is no discernible life and joy. There is no enthusiasm and celebration. All we have is law-keeping and repetition of the things we have always done. This becomes so unattractive that church feels like a funeral march for the Holy Spirit, which we repeat week after week. And then, we wonder why our churches are not growing and why young people don’t come to services. Some believe the Holy Spirit has not spoken to his church since the King James Bible was written. But, perhaps the problem is closed ears more than anything else. Perhaps the problem is that we have placed the Holy Spirit in a little crystal box with a label that reads, “Open only in case of emergency!” Perhaps we have become so fixed in our ways that we fail to discern where the Holy Spirit wants us to be and what he wants us to do.

If we are seeking for God’s truth, I advocate for discernment and Scripture reading. If we open ourselves to God’s possibilities and let the Holy Spirit come alongside us to guide our lives and point them in Christ’s direction, he will unleash his amazing power in our lives and will make us contagious, courageous, and transforming Christians, without the necessity of sweat lodges and overly clever marketing campaigns. I invite all of you today to allow this great power to transform your lives and the life of your church and to allow God’s Holy Spirit to lead you into a deeper relationship with Jesus, the Christ, who is the truth, the way and the life. Amen!