
Sermon for Pentecost

A sermon by the Rev. Bill Harkins
The Cathedral of St. Philip
27 May 2007
Acts 2:1-11; John 14: 8-17, (25-27)

Good morning to each of you, and welcome to the Cathedral of St. Philip on this Day of Pentecost, and a weekend during which we honor those who have so valiantly served out country. I especially want to extend our warm and heartfelt greetings to those family and friends gathered today for Holy Baptism. This is a joyous occasion indeed, and we are grateful that you are among us for this festive and spirit-filled event!

Today marks the end of the Easter season, and the Feast of the Pentecost is the liturgical marker of Christ's promise to send the Holy Spirit among us. It was, after all, the occasion of his Baptism on which he received the Holy Spirit that informed every action of his earthly ministry. On the Day of Pentecost, the power of the Spirit was given to the community of faith—the disciples, wherever they might be gathered—to remain with them for all time.

As we heard read so well in today's passage from Acts, the disciples were gathered together in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, as it was known among Greek speaking Jews. This festival occurred fifty days after Passover, and was originally an agricultural festival in which the first harvests of the season were offered. Over time it became an opportunity to commemorate the giving of the Laws to Moses at Sinai as well, so this festival day was significant indeed. On this particular day, ten days after the Ascension of Christ, the disciples were no doubt scared, and sad—grieving the loss of their risen Lord, who had gone away. I imagine that they were still uncertain as to the true nature of the events swirling around them. I wasn't there of course, but in my imagination I hear them saying one to another, "Where do we go from here?" On some level, they must have felt abandoned, and wondered, "What do we do now?" Like most of us, I know what it is like to be in search of meaning, and purpose, and to be afraid. I suspect we all know how this feels. And we ask ourselves in the face of loss, and grief, and feeling alone, "What do I do now."

In a real sense then the Day of Pentecost is the final, answering verse in the tone poem that is the Paschal Mystery—that process of transformation by which we are given new life, new spirit, and a new way of looking at the lives we lead. And it is fitting that Pentecost brings us full circle in the liturgical cycle of Lent, Holy Week, and Eastertide. But what does this mean, really? I want to suggest that it involves our grieving what is past and what has died or needs to die, followed by a period of waiting and hoping, then claiming and living into our new births, and finally accepting the spirit of the life that we are in fact already living. We see this process writ large in our liturgical year, especially in the cycle of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter, and Pentecost. The disciples went through each of these stages, and on the day of Pentecost so long ago, we are told that "a sound like the rush of a violent wind, filled the entire house where they were sitting. All of them filled with the Holy Spirit." Now we know that one interpretation of the Holy Spirit is that She is a comforter. I find it fascinating that the root of the word "orphan" in Latin means "one without comfort." So, in this sense, the Holy Spirit is one who comes to comfort us, and serves as an Advocate for God, who has adopted all of us. As Augustine said, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. In other words, until our restless hearts are at home in and with God, we are orphans, among those without true comfort, without a home. That house where the disciples were gathered on the Feast Day of Pentecost was in this sense an orphanage, into which the wind of the Spirit blew, and they were filled with the Spirit and adopted by that Spirit and in this way, they, and we, were transformed. I wonder if you can picture a time and place in

which you felt at home, and safe, and where you experienced, perhaps even despite loss and grief, a sense of the peace of God? I as thought about our time together this morning, and about these children whom we are to baptize soon, a memory came to mind.

When I was growing up my maternal grandparents had a small farm in North Georgia. I loved to roam the land tucked into the foothills, in the shadow of the Blue Ridge, and to fish in the small lake. And, I especially loved spending time with my grandparents. Indeed, they and that place were a sanctuary for me. Placed in the context of today's readings, I found comfort there, and they were my advocates. They did not often press me on the details of my life in Atlanta—they didn't question me about how many touchdowns I had or had not scored, or press me about that algebra grade. It was not that they didn't care about these things, but rather that their priority was being available to and in relationship with me. Perhaps this is the way it is with grandparents. They always seemed happy to see me. My being there was, for them, enough. Often when I got there I couldn't wait to call up the dogs, grab a fishing pole, and head off to the woods and the lake. I spent many hours beneath the old, glorious oak trees on the hill near their house, reading or napping in the hammock. It never failed that when I returned to the house my grandmother would have placed a welcoming gift of food on the dining room table. It was a ritual we both knew well.

Often, this ritual took the form of a piece of her homemade pound cake, lovingly prepared in her beloved kitchen, that sacred space from which her love for us all emanated in so many ways. Her pound cake was my favorite of those outward and visible signs of her love. And this is the thing, isn't it my sisters and brothers: it is the fruits of the spirit of those whom we love, and their love for us, which becomes a part of who we are, our own soul, our spirit. The gift of my grandmother's pound cake said, simply and with grace, "We love you" "I love you" and we are glad you are here. Here, you are at home, and we will provide comfort and shelter for you." I got it, and I deeply, deeply appreciated it.

As years went by, Vicky and I married and our sons were born, and we went off to graduate school, way up north, in Tennessee. We returned to visit when we could, and I delighted in seeing our sons roam the same fields and streams, and share my grandmother's pound cake. One day, while we were visiting, my grandmother called me into the kitchen and asked me to help her bake a pound cake to take back to Nashville with us. "Write down what I do," she said, "and when you get back to school make a copy, and mail it to me. I can't find my recipe." I found this curious, because she did not need a written recipe, she knew it by heart of course, but I did as I was told. Together we made the last pound cake she ever made. It was to be the last time I saw her. She died several days later, after a brief illness. After her funeral I drove back up to the farm, feeling lost, sad, and alone. I could not imagine a world without her comfort in it. The dining room table, empty of her pound cake, seemed a stark reminder of what we had lost. And then, silly me, I realized what she had done. Somewhere deep in her soul, God love her, she must have known she did not have much longer to live. And seizing what we in academia call a "teachable moment," she bestowed upon me the gift of one last cooking lesson with her, and a butter-stained sheet of paper with the recipe for the pound cake. She was giving it away, and not just the recipe either, but the gift of her spirit, her ability to comfort, and to be present in the moment, whether in her kitchen, or her garden, the place was suffused with her spirit that blew through it like a gentle summer breeze. I could feel the presence of that spirit comfort me, right there. She was gone, but something new was being born, given resurrection life, there and then.

Today, my friends, we participate in the sacrament of baptism which is, at heart, a Eucharistic act. We share with these children and their families the life of faith, the sacramental life of the Eucharist, broken, shared, and passed around in community. It means that each of us; finite, vulnerable, sometimes scared, are filled with the spirit of Christ just as those disciples so long ago. These children are baptized into that community of grace, and love, and filled with the Spirit. And like the disciples, we sometimes ask in our loss and uncertainty, as I did that day on my grandparent's porch, grieving her loss, "Now what am I going to do?" "You make the pound cake now," I heard my grandmother whisper. "Give the gift of yourself, find your own particular way to do this, you have the recipe, now make it your own. That is enough." Something had died, you see, and something new in the Spirit was being born. That's Pentecost.

"Now what do we do?" the disciples asked in those days after the Ascension. "Where do we go from here?" "Do not be afraid, or let your hearts be troubled," Christ says. "You have an advocate and comforter in the Holy Spirit. Peace be with you."

"Now what do we do," we ask on this glorious Pentecost morning, each of us, on our own journey. Well, we begin, in gratitude, with the Baptism of these blessed children and the new life and spirit they represent. Then, we will break the

bread, and offer ourselves in service, in community, in Christ, here, now. And that will be enough. After all, the Holy Spirit has promised to comfort and guide us, and, we have been given the recipe! Thanks be to God. Amen.

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