Spirituality



A scene from Pentecost is depicted in a stained-glass window in Queen of Apostles Chapel at the Maryknoll Society Center in Maryknoll, New York. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Thomas Gumbleton

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This Feast of Pentecost, which we celebrate on this weekend, should be the greatest feast day and the greatest celebration in the church year; although I think for most of us, we underestimate its importance. This is really the beginning of the church, the community of disciples of Jesus when they began to undertake the work that Jesus had come to proclaim — the good news. St. Luke, in the first lesson today, tries to give us, in a poetic way, the meaning of the feast, what's really behind what happens on, as we heard in the gospel, actually on Easter Sunday night.

St. Luke draws from different parts of the scriptures, especially the story of creation. In the Book of Genesis you read about the chaos before anything was really formed in creation. The mighty wind came and blew and began to form the universe. Now this isn't scientific; it's a way of trying to show God's power of drawing out of nothing what is the whole universe that we know today, including our beautiful planet, this earth. That mighty wind — the word for wind in Hebrew is "ruach," the same word that is the word for spirit.

Pentecost

May 20, 2018

Acts 2:1-11

Psalms 104

Galations 5:16-25

John 15:26-27; 16:12-15

Luke wants us to think about this feast as a new creation, God at work as God was at work in the beginning, drawing forth the universe from nothing. Then as you remember in the second creation story when God formed human beings, God breathed on them. Again, the same word "spirit," God gives them spirit life. So Luke is trying to help us to understand the importance of what happened when the spirit descended upon the disciples and created something new. At the time of the covenant, pillars of fire appeared when God gave Moses that law that made up the first covenant.

At Pentecost, tongues of fire come upon the disciples reminding us of, again, God's relationship with God's people. When we look at these images, we begin to get a sense, I hope, of how important this feast is. When you turn to the gospel lesson, put yourself in the situation of those first disciples. The word had gone out that Jesus was alive. They could hardly believe it and some, I'm sure, had great hesitation. They gathered together there in the upper room in darkness; they were afraid. Suddenly Jesus is in their midst and what does he do?

These disciples who are afraid and who, I'm sure, were concerned because they had fled, they had denied Jesus, they had betrayed Jesus, but the first thing he says is, "Peace be with you." He comes back to draw them into a community of love and peace. But then he gives them an extraordinary command. He says to them and he says to us, "As God sent me (Jesus says), I send you." So we're being commissioned to do the work of Jesus.

That's what Pentecost is really concerned with — that each one of us understands that God is sending forth the spirit of Jesus upon me, in this liturgy, at this moment, if I'm open to it and ready to receive that spirit. Then Jesus says, "I send you," to do what? What he did for them was forgive them immediately. "The evil you forgive is forgiven. The evil you restrain is restrained." Jesus commissions us to do the same thing in our world.

It doesn't take much for us to realize that this world in which we live right now is far from being the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed, a time when everyone would have fullness of life, where there would be peace in every community throughout the whole world. The reign of God, God's love overseeing everything, leading us into peace and fullness of life. Jesus is giving us a commission to forgive, to restrain evil, and to bring life, to bring goodness.

There's a beautiful holy card which I received recently. It's too small for me to show you, but it's a picture of Jesus on the cross. It's from Birmingham, Alabama, in a church there in a window. It shows Jesus on the cross with one arm (like this) pushing away, and the other arm (like this) drawing in. That's the commission he gives to us: Push away the evil, restrain it, and draw people together in peace, in love, in community of life. That's our task.

Just yesterday we're reminded again of the terrible violence in our society: Ten children killed at a school where they should be safe. They're murdered. Why does it happen again and again and again? It's because, I think, we don't work hard enough to push away the evil. Oh, our leaders say some of the right things: "We're going to protect our children." But time after time it happens, you hear the same words, and nothing changes. It's having a dramatic effect on young people; they're living in fear of going to school.

This is a commentary written by a middle school child, published in the Santa Maria Times. This is after the Parkland massacre three months ago. This young man, Sean Fina, wrote a commentary that appeared in the local paper. Here's what he said and it's a challenge to us: "We Americans need to ask ourselves a simple question. What do we value more: our communities and schools, or our beloved guns? ... As a junior high student, even though the probability is low, the thought of a shooter coming into my school's campus is always in the back of my mind."

Should any child have to go to school with that fear every day? Can't we push away that evil? Let me continue quoting him: "Knowing how available AR-15 like rifles are has added a new level of anxiety whenever I'm at school. I can't get over the fact that our government would rather have such guns available to the public than ensure safety for students and communities all over America. My fellow students and I expect a sense of safety, both physically and mentally, from our government. But allowing AR-15 like guns available for practically anyone over 18 years of age does not provide this. Instead of spending money on weapons to hurt others, we should be spending our money on improving our education system and ensuring safety for students."

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It's so clear isn't it? A 15-year-old youngster can write an op-ed piece for the paper that sets forth the issue so clearly. What do we do? We hope it all goes away, I guess. How many of us really take action and try to push away that evil by effective action — being in touch with our Congress, being in touch with our president, telling our leaders that we can't let this go on? That's part of what Jesus sends us to do today. Restrain evil, bring about reconciliation and love so that every community in our country, every school in our country, children can feel safe and learn, and be at peace.

I hope that as we celebrate the feast of Pentecost this year and we really reflect on what it means for the Holy Spirit to descend upon us, and we welcome that Holy Spirit into our spirit, I hope we will allow the spirit to change us, to drive us out into the world to change the world, to restrain the evil, to bring about reconciliation and love at every level in our homes, in our community, in our country, and throughout the world.

That's the call of this feast: Drive away evil, bring about reconciliation, love and peace. "As God has sent me," Jesus says to each of us, "I am sending you."

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