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A little noticed detail in the Pentecost accounts is that the Spirit descends on community groups, not individuals. Even in Paul's road-to-Damascus experience, it wasn't until he met with Ananias that the scales fell from his eyes and he was baptized. When Luke tells the story of Pentecost, he starts with the detail that everybody had come together. When John depicts Jesus bequeathing his Spirit to the disciples it is again in a communal setting. Mary was not given the Spirit during her morning encounter with the risen Christ in the garden, and even when the beloved disciple "believed" at the empty tomb, John does not say that the Spirit came to him. Jesus conferred his Spirit on the community, in fact, on the community who were gathered in fear, trying to protect themselves from the rest of the world.

Luke and John offer two very different renditions of the gift of the Spirit to the community of faith. In Luke, it happens after fifty days: a final forty-day tutorial during which the risen Lord appeared to disciples until the day of his ascension. After a ten-day period of retreat, the Spirit dramatically invades the gathered community with the result that they cannot help but share their Gospel.

John paints quite a different picture. In his depiction, on the very day of the resurrection the risen Jesus breaks into the midst of the closed-off and fearful disciples to offer them peace. Before all else, this gift of peace comes in the form of

forgiveness. This is the first encounter of the risen Lord with the disciples who had abandoned and betrayed him. Their locked doors are one more sign of their lack of faith. Yet, Christ breaks through it all with the offer of peace. This is a profoundly humbling moment, a replay of sorts of Jesus washing their feet. As he greets them with peace they know all too well that they don't deserve his acceptance. They have proven themselves cowards and traitors, and he's proclaiming his love for them just as they are. The risen Lord appears in their midst in the most unexpected way. He shows them his hands and his side, signs of an irrevocable past. Nothing can change what happened. But just as truly as he is free from death, he offers them freedom from being determined by their past.

In *Breathing Under Water* Richard Rohr says that forgiveness implies letting go "of our hope for a better or different past." Both the forgiver and the forgiven acknowledge the reality of what has happened between them, but they will not let themselves be bound by it. They know the hurt but they refuse to replay it again and again, pressing the bruise so it will never fade away. Forgiveness is not a judicial process or a market exchange through which there can be a correctly calculated payback that evens the score. Forgiveness is an encounter of love. Forgiveness springs from the belief the past can be redeemed and its effects can be redirected from a passive acceptance of injustice or the vengeful arithmetic of "an eye for an eye."

This is the Gospel the Spirit impels the disciples to preach. They can preach forgiveness only because they have experienced it. If it was humbling to be forgiven by the risen Christ, it was also empowering. Pope Francis explains this in *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of The Gospel") by saying "No one can strip us of the dignity bestowed upon us by [Christ's] boundless and unfailing love. With a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy, he makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew" (EG #3).

The community born out of Pentecost is a community of the forgiven who are commissioned to forgive. These are people who must never forget either their origin or their destiny: they are a gathering of the frail and failing called to strengthen one another. The community born out of Pentecost must cultivate what Pope Francis calls "the arduous art of reconciliation," an art which requires grace and the support of a community (*Amoris Laetitia*, "The Joy of Love").

When we greet each other with peace today, we are challenged to remember the meaning Jesus gave that word. The peace of Christ be with you” is the greeting of sinner to sinner, Christian to Christian as forgiven forgivers. It is a blessing that calls us to humility and generosity in equal measure. It is a blessing that we can make real only in communities enlivened by the breath of the Spirit.

ACTS 2:1-11

While the events of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection are narrated with very similar details in all four Gospels, only two Gospels tell the story of his birth and only the Acts of the Apostles relates the stories of his ascension and Pentecost. Rather than using those facts as a measure of the probable historicity of the events, we can see them as an indication of the vision and theology of the evangelist. What did Luke intend to proclaim with the Pentecost story?

Luke’s lack of details in this narrative is so unusual that it must have a purpose. When did this happen? When the day of Pentecost “was fulfilled.” Pentecost which came 50 days after Passover was a harvest feast which included a remembrance of how God’s gift of the Law was accompanied by fire and sound from heaven. The word “fulfilled” mysteriously intimates that a new phase of history is about to begin, completing all that went before it (See Luke, 9:51).

Where were the disciples when this happened? Location is the least of Luke’s concerns. He says literally, “they were with one accord, together,” indicating that being together in heart and mind was the essential point; the space they occupied mattered little in comparison to their attitude. Luke offers no material details until he describes the group’s experience. A sound like wind and tongues as of fire were the outward signs, but the key detail is that the community was suddenly enflamed with the Holy Spirit.

By telling us that Jerusalem was home to “devout Jews of every nation under heaven,” Luke brings a new crowd into the story. In his Gospel he had spoken primarily of the disciples, unsophisticated Galileans, the leaders with their underlings and with a few other characters. Now the focus is on a crowd that represents chosen people from the entire known world. The horizon has become limitless.

Luke doesn’t tell us what the Spirit-filled disciples preached. That will come later. Instead, he points out that their message made sense to a multitude of people — all

in their own languages. This is not, as some say, the reversal of Babel but its transformation, the sign that the Gospel can flourish in every culture and tongue. It has nothing to do with uniformity of expression but rather blesses the multiplicity of ways faith can be expressed in word and deed.

Throughout history it has been too easy for the Church to forget that from our beginnings our community knew no boundaries. Jesus broke open closed systems by forgiving anyone who sought it, reaching out to the untouchables, commissioning women as disciples and privileging the poor. The first gift the Spirit gave the disciples impelled them beyond the limits of their own cultural background. The Acts of the Apostles is the story of their struggle to carry out that vocation, to make the Gospel knowable to the whole world.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:3b-7, 12-13

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul offers a slightly different perspective on the influence of the Spirit in the community. He focuses on the genuine gifts of the Spirit and their effects on communal life.

Our reading begins with the enigmatic statement that “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” A literal reading of that simply does not make sense in the 21st century when anyone can say just about anything with impunity, when people can proclaim their faith vociferously while exhibiting precious little of the gifts of the Spirit. What Paul is getting at is not about the words a person can enunciate but the origins of faith. If we take the phrase to mean that no one can come to belief without the aid of the Holy Spirit we get closer to Paul’s way of thinking. Then, we might see this verse leading to what he will say next as he explains that the gift of faith provides the underpinning of all other gifts.

When we recognize faith as a gift rather than an accomplishment or status, we acknowledge that we aren’t writing the script. Paul is saying that every gift, every call to serve, every advance in the reign of God is a work of God. We don’t decide who gets what; we can only choose how to use what we are given.

As we read the letters to the Corinthians we might find ourselves particularly sympathetic to the community. Like ourselves, they had antagonistic factions among them, some based in ideology, some in class or in preference for one or another leader or teacher. Paul viewed the disunity sown by proponents of those blocs as more destructive of Christianity than persecution could ever be. Therefore, he tried

to call everyone back to their roots in the Spirit of God.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, Paul called the community to build their unity by enhancing their diversity. The destructive power of factionalism comes from the closed mindset and competition of the parties. When each side assumes that their truth is the only truth, they are claiming ownership of the Holy Spirit rather than stewardship of the Spirit's gifts. When each group learns to humbly recognize that the Spirit's gifts are given them for the good of the whole, they can learn to play their part in furthering God's work in their world. Paul uses the image of the body to make it startlingly clear that self-serving divisions create mortal danger for the community.

JOHN 20:19-23

Like Luke, John does not bother to tell us exactly where the disciples were when Jesus came into their midst to impart his Spirit and his peace. All we know about the place is that it had locked doors. But while John skips over details, he is clear about when it happened: on the evening of the day of the resurrection, the first day of the week. That is supposed to remind us of the day on which God created light. John's "first day" was a very full day, one that included at least in germ everything that Luke presented as happening during the 50 days between the resurrection and Pentecost. The Gospel we hear today is the culmination of all of it.

Jesus becomes present and greets his disciples twice with the word "peace" or *shalom*. This is no rote greeting; it recalls the Last Supper when Jesus pledged to give the disciples his own peace, a sense of inner wholeness unlike anything the world can give. His first greeting of peace was an expression of love and forgiveness. No matter what fear had led the disciples to do in the past, he was there for them to give them his peace. Greeting them with this blessing of peace was the first gesture of bestowing his Spirit on them. The *shalom* of his forgiveness was the necessary interior condition for receiving his Spirit.

In between his two blessings of peace, Jesus showed his disciples his hands and feet, not only as proof of who he really was, but also as evidence that death had no more power over him than did rejection or betrayal. Having seen that sign, the disciples were prepared to receive a peace they never could have imagined without knowing Jesus; it was the peace of the one who could forgive as freely as he gave his life (John 10:17-18).

Recalling God's gesture of creation, Jesus then breathed over the disciples saying "Receive the Holy Spirit." Here, instead of the sight and sound and exuberance recounted in Acts, we are led to imagine a scene of what we might call profound soul-to-soul presence. We see Jesus and the disciples in solemn intensity. It is a moment like never before as he made them one in him as he was in the Father. Jesus gives them his peace, his Spirit, and thus empowers them to carry on his mission of bringing all into one (John 17:21).

In handing over his mission to them Jesus says nothing of preaching or baptizing; he commissions them to forgive. In her book, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst*, Sandra Schneiders explains that a literal translation of this verse reads: "If of anyone you forgive the sins, they are forgiven to them. Any you hold fast are held fast." The risen Lord was handing over his Spirit and the mission of bringing all into communion with God and one another. This has nothing to do with judging who cannot be forgiven but with unity. Jesus never spoke of withholding forgiveness! As Schneiders points out, "By refusing to forgive, we embrace the person's sin and reject the person." Jesus commissioned the disciples to be agents of forgiveness, bringing people into community and holding one another until all are one. That is the mission the Spirit empowers us to carry forth. Everything else is just details.

Planning: Pentecost Sunday

By: Lawrence Mick

Today brings us to the end of the 50 days of Easter with the celebration of Pentecost. This means a slight shift in emphasis, but it should still be clear that Easter is not yet over. The décor and music and preaching should remind people that we are still celebrating the Resurrection.

I say "slight shift in emphasis" because it is important to remember that the Spirit has not been absent from the Easter story all along. While we find it necessary and helpful to distinguish the role of the three persons of the Trinity, none of them ever acts independently of the others; God is one! So the challenge today is to help the parish celebrate the Holy Spirit who represents the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead, who is the guiding force for the Church, and who makes God present to us by the Divine Indwelling in our hearts. While the bulk of that challenge may fall to the preacher, planners and other ministers should support the effort by the

choices they make.

It is also important that people recognize the presence of the Spirit in our own times and our own lives. The Spirit of God is not some vague entity existing in some far-off heaven. The Spirit is God with us, Emmanuel continuing throughout history. And the Spirit is present and active in every part of creation, not just in Catholics or just in Christians or even just in people.

Some theologians today speak of the Holy Spirit as the energy force that permeates creation and propels God's plan of salvation forward through history. The Spirit is God at work slowly but steadily drawing all creation (through evolution and other dynamics) toward the fulfillment of God's plan, when "God may be all in all." (1 Cor. 15:28). As next week's readings will remind us, that plan of redemption includes all of creation, not just humans, though the Spirit's presence in people may be more evident to us.

Can preachers and planners work together on this feast to help parishioners become more aware of the presence of the Spirit all around us? Planners might begin by sharing with one another where they have noticed the Spirit at work in their lives. Then use that heightened awareness to craft petitions that pray for a greater attention to the Spirit's presence in several of those places or events. Let this day be a time to celebrate the Holy Spirit, to rejoice in all the ways that God touches our lives and guides us and sustains us.

If you want to use the texts for the Vigil of Pentecost for a Saturday evening Mass, decide which of the vigil readings to use and let the ministers know early. The sequence is required on Sunday; be sure to find a setting that involves the assembly.

Prayers: Pentecost Sunday

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Unity is power. In the face of political, religious, racial, economic, gender and other differences, we are more aware than ever of the quest for unity. Today's readings portray Jesus' followers gathered together, seeking direction. In their unity, they are empowered to love, to forgive, to proclaim and to renew the face of the earth. The

world needs what Jesus bestowed upon them and upon us. We pray that the Spirit will help us to use this power for others and for our fractured world.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, You were present to your followers who were gathered together: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, You sent the Holy Spirit to be with them and us: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, You gave us all the power to forgive and love others: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray now for a world in need of unity and love.

Minister For the church, that we may be an expression and source of unity for the whole world. Send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.

- For peace among all nations and peoples. Send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.
- For unity within our country and our government. Send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.
- For the courage to resist prejudice toward and fear of those who are different from us. Send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.
- For those who are maligned or discredited because they are different. Send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.
- For individuals, families and organizations that promote unity and understanding. Send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.
- For all those within this community who are seeking peace, healing or encouragement. Send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.

Presider God who makes all things new, we ask you to open our hearts to the power of the Holy Spirit. Make us instruments of love, peace and unity in our homes, our community and the world. Give us the courage to act, especially when we are doubtful or afraid. We pray as one people, united in the name of your son, Jesus. Amen.

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