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by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)

patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

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“Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth” (Psalm 104).

Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-11; Ps 104; 1 Cor 12:3b-7, 12-13; John 20:19-23

Along with the more familiar account of Pentecost in Acts when wind and fire fall on the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, today’s Gospel from John offers a more compressed story in which Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on his disciples during his first appearance to them after his resurrection. If we unpack the drama of that scene, we discover why the gift of the Holy Spirit is so closely associated with the ministry of reconciliation. If we entertain that this process did not occur immediately but over time, we get a sense of how profound this transformation was for the first generation and is for us as well.

Following John’s narrative, the events after the Last Supper had been a nightmare of failure, recrimination and betrayal. When Jesus foretold that they would all scatter at the first sign of danger, the disciples had all vowed to stand by him. But when

Jesus was arrested in the garden, they all fled. The next day, everyone in Jerusalem knew he had been crucified and was dead. As the sabbath fell like a pall over the city, still in shock the disciples found their way back in the upper room to hide, grieve and repent their cowardice.

On the evening of the first day of the week, Jesus is standing in their midst. His first word to them is "Peace." He shows them his pierced hands and side. He now commissions them by breathing on them. It is an act of creation as his own Holy Spirit enters them. As they have been forgiven, they must now forgive and preach forgiveness.

The emphasis falls on Peter, the leader, but all the apostles must have gone through the same experience of receiving unconditional mercy. Failure, not success, was the foundation of their call to tell the story of Jesus' love for them as sinners. This is how they knew Jesus truly was from God, because only God could love this much and this way. Only the breath of the Spirit could raise someone from the depths of despair and give them back their lives renewed and capable of love.

Pentecost makes us ambassadors of reconciliation. The church evangelizes by welcoming broken-hearted sinners into the peace of Christ, a peace the world cannot give. All the gifts of the Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord, aid us in knowing how to share God's mercy. Pentecost is called the birthday of the church, and those who find rebirth in her know the wind and fire that must recreate them before they can share in the ministry of renewing the face of the earth.

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