

Pentecost Sunday
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
31 May 2020

Acts 2:1-11

I just read a funny meme. You know, one of those pictures with a phrase or two either at the top or bottom margins. My kids send these out all the time and I find some of them cute. Today, I finally got one I liked. A confused young woman is staring up at heaven, and she seems to be listening to someone speaking from above in a voice bubble. The message reads, "If your 'Holy Ghost' juts makes you run and dance, but it doesn't help you live a holy life. Then it's not the Holy Ghost, it's ADHD." Just because churches seem very busy, it doesn't mean they are being led by the Holy Spirit.

The Reverend George Wadsfield, III was a proper English Vicar who ministered faithfully to his congregation in Woodsbury during the Methodist Revival of the mid 18th century. The Methodists were often accused of being "Enthusiasts" because their preaching emphasized the active work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believers. As a result, some Methodists spoke in tongues, elevated their hands during prayer, and danced during their liturgical services. Many preachers in England opposed "Enthusiasm" as a most vile form of fanaticism. Mr. Wadsfield here was one of them. On his tombstone, located at the back of his church, you can find the following inscription, "Here lies the faithful Reverend George Wadsfield, III, who preached the Gospel at St. Mary's for 37 years, without Enthusiasm!" (This story was told to me by my Church history professor, Les Fairfield, at Trinity Seminary in 2005.)

There is a difference in how Catholic and Anglo-Catholic traditions, on the one hand, and some Evangelicals, on the other, see the working of the Holy Spirit. For many 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. Suddenly, you are "Slain by the Spirit." Someone I met once believed that you can go to church every week for years and not be saved, unless you have been baptized by the Holy Spirit. She explained that sometimes you can be watching a revival on TV and, upon the preacher's instructions, place your hand on the screen and, suddenly, you are overcome by the Spirit. I thought this was very cool because the only thing I feel when I watch televangelists is an overwhelming desire to buy a Mercedes Benz.

For the Catholic Traditions, on the other hand, the workings of the Holy Spirit are less an explosion that happens all at once, but rather a slow process 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 thought 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 advice 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 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. 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.)

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 today” 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 the unknown god, and the Totem Pole. My friends the truth the Holy Spirit leads us into is not, and can never be, contrary 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, similar to what the Church of England was during the Methodist revival. 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. I once heard that “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 do.

If we are seeking for God’s truth, I advocate discernment and Scripture reading. If we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit’s possibilities and allow it to come alongside us to guide our lives and point them in Christ’s direction, God will unleash his amazing power in our lives. If we let it, the Holy Spirit 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. I am convinced that the holy Spirit is constantly transforming God’s Church, and those congregations that allow the Holy Spirit to lead them into a deeper relationship with Christ, become transformed and transforming congregations. May God continue to bless you, Amen!