

A Living Church

John 14:8-17, 25-27

May 28, 2023

It is a persistent and perennial question for all who wander and wonder, for all who long for the certainty that seems to always elude us. I have heard it asked in hospital rooms and in church committee meetings. I've heard it voiced in corner offices and in homeless shelters, at assemblies of seasoned church leaders and youth group gatherings. I have asked it myself when I've reached the limits of my own stamina and spiritual strength.

Where is God? Where is this Holy Spirit?

I find it comforting that these questions are woven throughout the stories of sacred scripture. From the Israelites wandering through uncharted wilderness. From the exiles deported to Babylon. In the desperate voice of Job immersed in unbearable suffering. It is the question that Jesus himself asks from the cross in words that carry the depth of human desperation. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

And it is on the hearts of the disciples in this morning's Gospel reading. Philip speaks for the whole group: *"Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied. Where is God?"*

Perhaps you can sense the exasperation and disappointment in the response Jesus gives. "All this time we have spent together, and you still don't get it. All these journeys we have traveled side by side, and you still don't see me, really see me. Where is God? God is right here...with you, among you, has been all along, will be no matter what."

Today the Church celebrates Pentecost. The account of the day itself is electric. At 9 o'clock in the morning, the Holy Spirit arrives in the rush of a roaring wind,

flaming tongues of fire descending from heaven, and dynamic preaching to a diverse audience gathered in Jerusalem. That's the story we read in the Book of Acts—the Church set on fire with Holy Spirit.

But this morning I'd like to focus for a few moments on John's alternate description of the Spirit's presence—a Pentecost 2.0. It comes in Jesus' final promises to his friends. Moments of intimacy charged with emotion. Promises of comfort. Assurances of guidance. Peace in the midst of chaos, confusion, and fear. As his disciples struggle with what lies ahead, Jesus offers a deeply personal promise. "My peace I give to you."

The peace Jesus gives stands in stark contrast to what the world dispenses. We are taught that peace is earned through effort and striving, that peace is settled rest at the end of long effort. But consider this: that the Spirit of God does not come to those who have earned it, that God does not wait for us to be completely faithful, courageous, daring disciples. The Spirit's presence is not a reward for our accomplishments. I want to say that again. *The Spirit's presence is not a reward for our accomplishments, but a gift given when we need it the most.* Listen again to the words of Jesus. "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid."

Yes, sometimes Pentecost is flames and rushing winds. But sometimes Pentecost comes in those quiet, unexpected moments when our hearts are simply comforted, when our spirits are suddenly settled, when peace arrives in spite of daunting external circumstances. Peace—the peace Jesus gives—is the presence of the sacred in the midst of

trouble and fear. With Philip, we want to know where God can be found. With all of the disciples, we want to know: What is the most unmistakable, undeniable, visible sign of God's presence?

And here is the answer: It is love.
Whenever love replaces fear,
the Spirit of God is with us.
Whenever love overcomes hatred,
the Church is filled with Holy Spirit.
Love, and love alone, is the witness of a living church.

In these final words to his dear friends, Jesus could not be clearer. The surest sign of the Spirit's presence is the practice of love shared in community. In fact, over the next four chapters, Jesus will repeat the command three times. *Love one another. Love one another. Love one another.*

This is our work—to passionately pursue the love of God who is always already with us. Listen! Pentecost is not the inaugural arrival of a previously absent God; it is the awakening of a previously passive people. It is the revival, the reawakening, of a group of disciples who suddenly realize, *God was with us all along.*

When I was in college and beginning to consider the possibility that God might be calling me to ministry, I prayed for weeks asking for an unmistakable sign that this was in fact the case. I wanted specificity. I wanted fireworks. I wanted the heavens parted, a booming voice from heaven declaring that I was chosen for this vocation. I asked God for a message written in the sky, an angelic messenger, a dreamlike vision, or perhaps just a four-leaf clover in the quad. I gave God three whole weeks. *Nothing.*

Deeply disappointed by the lack of clarity, responsiveness, and punctuality on God's part, I began to reconsider law school and went for a walk with Will Willimon, the dean of Duke Chapel and a trusted mentor. Will allowed me to explain my frustration in great detail, and finally, after listening for two laps around the track, he asked a question that shifted my perspective in a powerful, perhaps

permanent, way. "Have you ever considered that sometimes the Holy Spirit whispers instead of shouting?" No, I had not. Will encouraged me to consider the whispers of the Spirit in those places where all along the way I had been loved, affirmed, and led. He encouraged me to look back on those small moments, those seemingly insignificant moments, when seeds were planted and watered and nourished. Sometimes, I think Pentecost is the quiet gift of encouragement. Sometimes, I think the Spirit whispers through the voice of a friend. Sometimes, I think a Church alive with the Spirit is one that persists in sharing the love of Christ in ways that might seem too small to notice. But love alone, in all its forms, is the sign of a living Church. Love alone.

Could it really be that simple? We must, I think, acknowledge the reality of our context. From all directions, we are force-fed fear. We are being taught to distrust our neighbors, to expect the worst in each other, to live in these fragile, constructed bubbles and divided camps. In such a setting, is it even possible to practice the kind of love that Jesus describes? To experience the Spirit's presence in those subtle and quiet ways?

I believe the answer is yes, and here is why. We were not created to fear. Whenever we choose the path of love, we are living in harmony with our created selves, our most authentic and true selves. We are living with the grain of God's Spirit, God's intention for all of creation. We were created to love God. We were created to experience the Spirit in each other. We will be most alive and most at peace when we practice the love that is our created gift. I truly believe that the Holy Spirit is not yet finished with us or with this world. We need the witness of those earliest disciples who found their faith, despite the fear, in living the love Jesus commanded. We need to reclaim the presence of the Spirit whenever our inclination to love is released and our fear is overcome.

Operating Instructions is the title of Anne Lamott's first book. The book shares the author's experience

of parenting a young child. It is alternately laugh-out-loud funny and heartbreakingly poignant. When her son Sam was two years old, Anne took him on a trip to Lake Tahoe, where they stayed in a condo by the lake. All the rooms in this particular building had light-blocking blinds so that guests could play all night and then sleep all day. One day, Anne put Sam to sleep in his Pack 'n Play in the totally darkened bedroom and then went to work writing in the next room.

Just a few moments later she heard the toddler calling her name, then knocking on the door from the inside. She got up to put her son back to bed and then experienced every parent's nightmare. The door was locked. Somehow Sam had managed to push the button on the inside of the knob, and from the other side of the door he was calling, "Mommy! Mommy!" And she was saying as calmly as she could, "Sam, just jiggle the doorknob, honey. Just push the button again." Of course, he couldn't even see the doorknob in the pitch-black room.

When it became clear to him that his mother could not open the door, the toddler's panic set in. She could hear him sobbing from the other side of the door and did everything she could think of. She tried to break down the door with her shoulder. She called the rental agency, the property manager. She left frantic messages on answering machines, all the while running back and forth to speak words of comfort to her son locked in that dark room. Mother and son, both terrified.

And finally, after trying every other alternative, Anne did the only thing she could do. She lay down on the carpet, and she slid her fingers under the door where there was a tiny gap. She instructed her son over and over to do the same: to come to the door and to find his mother's fingers in the gap. And somehow, after a moment searching, the boy found them. She felt his tiny fingers touching hers. He quieted down, and they stayed like that until help came, him holding her fingers in the dark, feeling her presence, her care, her love.

The promise of Pentecost is that God is always already with us. Whenever we need that reminder most, whenever we most need to experience the presence of the holy despite the constant rattle of fear, we need only reach out.

My peace I give to you. Do not be afraid.

And so, come, Holy Spirit.

Come, Holy Spirit, in the rush of a violent wind.

Come, Holy Spirit, in tongues of fire.

Come, Holy Spirit, in quiet moments of reflection and prayer.

Come, Holy Spirit, to comfort us when we are most afraid.

Come, Holy Spirit, and do not leave us.

Give us the courage to be a living Church. Amen.