“An Introvert’s Pentecost” or “Finding purpose in your baptism”

Rev. Debra McGuire

Bethany Presbyterian Church, San Bruno, CA

John 20:19-23; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

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***John 20:19-23***

***9When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you******.” 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”***

***1 Corinthians 12:3b-13***

***3Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.***

***4Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, 5and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, 6and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10to another the working of powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.***

***12For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.***

Have any of you ever started talking about something, and then in one moment forget why you even brought that up? Maybe you said to your conversation partner, “I forgot where I was going with that.”

That’s me after a week of hearing magnificent sermons and lectures at the recent preaching conference, and after the second of seven classes I’ve signed up for, reading the book, “What Kind of Church, Anti-black Racism and Slavery in the Presbyterian Church.”1 Everything in my brain from these activities is SO important, and SO crucial, and the time is JUST right! Yikes! Take a deep breath! It’s overwhelming, but perfect for the season of Pentecost. After all, Pentecost is when we might expect to hear the scripture typically used on this Pentecost Sunday that is full of the confusion and noise of people speaking and listening and understanding one another. From the text in Acts about Pentecost, we might expect today fantastical experiences of tongues of fire, a rush of a violent wind, cacophony as they all spoke in their different languages, “bold preaching, mass baptism.”2 It’s enough to make my stuffed-to-the-gills brain explode!

I did my usual stream-of-consciousness reading and searching and found many fascinating things. Unfortunately my fascination with how the brain works and how we make connections, and how our brains need connections to fulfill their job as our great prediction machine3 – would make me say, “I forgot where I was going with that.”

I got started thinking about connections when trying to connect the two texts for today. I was trying to figure out why I was a little let down by reading the low key version of Jesus passing on his Spirit to his disciples, kind of privately, in the upper room, not at a grand ascension into heaven, or accompanied by all that noise and chaos I was kind of looking forward to. Not to worry though, I did put it in all of the rest of the liturgy. I was missing from our gospel lesson, all that grandiose God stuff that makes us think of important and powerful things, and brings us reassurance that it’s all about God! It turns out that none of the *gospel* stories tell about the grand noise and wind and chaos.

It turns out that the description of Pentecost as a big and noisy event, only exists in the Book of Acts. The reading for today is what I call “An Introvert’s Pentecost.” The great gift of the Holy Spirit was an intimate event, only one line, one could almost miss it: *22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,“Receive the Holy Spirit.”*

The very breath of God. You can probably feel it on your face; you have seen it whenever a feather floats or a candle flickers; felt it every time you sigh, that light exhale or light touch that comes without any pressure or force, nevertheless when the Holy Spirit hits us just right, it is as strong as anything that can knock us right over.

One image of the Holy Spirit that we often see is that of a dove. Again, looking for connections, we find that the dove goes all the way back to Noah. In Genesis we read, “When Noah sent out a dove from the ark to see if the flood waters had receded. When the dove returned, "there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf" (Genesis 8:11).”4 And further, in “all three synoptic gospels, when John baptized Jesus, "the Spirit descended upon him as a dove" (Matthew 3:16 = Mark 1:10 = Luke 3:22). [The dove then], reminds us that Pentecost celebrates the descent of the dove and the peace of the Spirit into our own lives today.”

The peace of God that the dove represented; the baptism that the dove represented, and the Spirit of Christ are all ways to imagine the love of God in Christ that we celebrate at Pentecost. That Spirit given to Christ’s disciples as Jesus departed is the same Spirit in whom we pray, live, and have our being.5 The text from 1 Corinthians today celebrates the effect of this Spirit. The text is one often used at baptisms in the church, or at ordinations or celebrations of service.

The connection between the text from the gospel of John, and the text from 1 Corinthians is baptism. This is a beautiful and crucial part of our faith as the Presbyterian Church (USA). As a denomination we only have two sacraments, that we define as the two things that Jesus commanded his disciples to do. One sacrament, communion, is our celebration of The Lord’s Supper, because Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” And the second sacrament, baptism, comes from the gospel of Matthew which reads, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Today the day when we celebrate the Holy Spirit is a perfect day to also celebrate Baptism then. Just as the “noisy” Pentecost text includes people of different backgrounds and cultures understanding one another, Paul in his 1 Corinthians text reminds us that people of different backgrounds and cultures can be baptized and be welcomed into the one body, the Church. There are a variety of gifts, ways to serve, and activities, “*but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.*And *11All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. 12For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.*

We are not to judge or rank any of God’s gifts because each one is unique and given by the Spirit, for the same purpose. Verse 7 says, *7To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”*

That seemingly small action of Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit into his disciples is right in the midst of our gospel lesson for today from John 20. Usually when this portion is preached we emphasize how Jesus walked into the room even though the doors were locked, even though he was supposed to be dead, and we emphasize the text just after, when Thomas sought reassurance of Jesus’ identity by seeing his wounds. But today we emphasize only one verse, verse 22, *22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”*

And look where that Holy Spirit has led us. That Holy Spirit is breathed into us with our first breath and we are claimed as God’s from the beginning. Whenever one is baptized is a sign and symbol of the claim that has *already* happened.

Imagine with me the implications of all being baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, queer or straight, American or Russian, gender fluid or binary, music lovers or not, book readers or kindle, Republican or Democratic, black or brown or white or Asian or mixed or other, what else?

What would our world, our country, our church look like if we acted like we believed that? How can we be as inclusive as we say we are? How can we show that the hard right Evangelical Christian Nationalists don’t speak for all Christians? Jonathan Merritt6, religion writer, speaker at this years Festival of Homiletics, i.e. preaching conference, says that when we are disturbed by Evangelical Speak and Christian Nationalists and are too polite to speak up, we are in fact, handing their microphone right down to the next generation who will not know that there are different Christians out there. We will be the cause of our own downfall as the most amplified speak will be the only voice heard.

Think of the other battles looming in society at large. Homelessness. Racism as a system that was built and maintained specifically to keep certain people, (i.e. chattel slavery) down and to maintain the strong monetary component of the early United States. The destruction of our planet. Immigration and missing children. Basic civility and our seemingly unstoppable urge to destroy an enemy.

Can’t you just hear the ghosts of our civil rights ancestors calling us to speak up. The time is now. Can’t you just hear the voice of Elie Wiesel, holocaust survivor and author who asks, about the holocaust, “Where was the rest of the world?” He says, *“We must always take sides.* Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. *“Action is the only remedy* to indifference: the most insidious danger of all.”

Or John Lewis telling us to get into good trouble.

We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, and in the name of that gift we have been baptized into Christ. What do you do when your spiritual gifts don’t include effective ways of taking a side, taking a stand? We can hang out with people who do have those gifts, and add our gifts along side them. We can write postcards to (how many Chris?) hundreds? Thousands by now? To remind them to vote. We can stand *alongside* people like Rev. Penny Nixon who says her favorite place is behind a megaphone. We can use the gifts we have and don’t worry about trying to do things we can’t do. We can find a place to fit that will be perfect for our gifts and still be a part of our Christian witness to justice this world so badly needs. No gift is too small and no gift is insignificant. At some point, doing nothing is no longer an option.

Just as Jesus breathing on the disciples in the upper room seems a small private moment, we often recognize the Spirit in like small private moments of our own. Invite the Spirit into your next prayer, your next question, your next area for discernment. Remember *. 7To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* The Spirit doesn’t come in order to separate, the Spirit is for the *common* good.

Removing Critical Race Theory, Outlawing women’s care for their own bodies, banning books are not things that work for the common good. What will we do with the Spirit that lives in us?

Let us pray….

1Video of Rev. Kamal Hassan's interview at First Pres Berkeley with Rick Leong about this book by William Yoo. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDdJOH40yX4&t=559s>

2“I Will Pour Out My Spirit,” Debi Thomas, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2650-i-will-pour-out-my-spirit>

3<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-brain-learns-in-unexpected-ways/#:~:text=In%201949%20psychologist%20Donald%20Hebb,happens%2C%20learning%20has%20taken%20place>.

4<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay> “Peace to You” By Dan Clendenin. Posted 21 May 2023.

5Acts 17:28, Paul’s apologetic of Christ, quoting poets from the same era.

28For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we, too, are his offspring.’ (The saying, “For in him we live and move and have our being” comes from Epimenides of Crete or another unknown Athenian poet. In the same way, the second quote Paul uses is from the poem *Phaenomena* from the Cilician Stoic Aratus.)

6<https://www.jonathanmerritt.com/about>