

Acts 2:1-21 or Genesis 11:1-9
Psalm 104:25-35, 37
Romans 8:14-17 or Acts 2:1-21
John 14:8-17, (25-27)

In the name of one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

A Methodist, a Baptist and an Episcopalian all found themselves in Hell. The devil asked the Methodist if he knew why he was there. The Methodist replied, “Yes, I do. I cheated on my wife. That’s why I’m here.” The devil then asked the same question of the Baptist and he said, “Yes. I’m here because I used to get drunk time and time and time again. That’s why I’m here.” The devil then turned to the Episcopalian and asked if he knew why he was in hell. The man replied, “You know, I’ve been thinking about that and the only thing that comes to mind is that once at a formal dinner party I used my dessert fork to eat my salad.”

As I was working on my sermon this week: reading and (as my grandfather used to put it) cogitating on the Scriptures; I looked back at my previous Pentecost Day sermons, to see what I had already said on the subject of the Church’s birthday and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Last year I talked about the unpredictability and the dangerous nature of the Holy Spirit – being a wind that blows where it will and tongues of fire that burn where they will. I talked about the fact that we cannot harness the power of the Spirit. Instead, we have to surrender to its frightening power and place ourselves at the mercy of a God whose grace and compassion are enough to help us when we get into trouble. I likened

surrender to the Spirit to walking in a dense fog – not being able to see where you are going, but always following the voice of the one who is leading the way.

Two years ago I preached about how the Holy Spirit's flame and fireflies are alike. Both lights are mysterious in where they land, and how they work. And the fact that recent research has concluded that fireflies may be becoming endangered because the constant lights of civilization, lights that never go out, confuse fireflies when they try to mate, thereby stopping their reproduction. The same can happen to us with the Holy Spirit's flame. If we let other things distract us from following the light of the Spirit in the world, we too can become endangered.

Three years ago I said that we could take some cues from the movie *The Wizard of Oz* when it came to dealing with the Spirit, because Dorothy and her family and friends lived a very drab, black & white life (consumed by small, ordinary problems) until the big wind came and blew them into a different existence. I suggested that if we would all read the Bible, pray, and reach beyond ourselves to help others we would open ourselves to the power of the great wind – the Holy Spirit – which could then blow us into a breathtakingly beautiful existence in which we too were closer to the mysterious, powerful Oz – the God who created the world.

So ... an unpredictable, even dangerous wind and fire, which provides a light that we risk losing if we do not give it room to burn, and the need to read Scripture, pray and work toward the Kingdom in order to be ready to be blown into a new and radically

different life: those were the issues and challenges that I placed before you. In the words of that deep thinker and great American philosopher, Dr. Phil; “How’s that workin’ out for you?”

In her book, Teaching a Stone to Talk, Annie Dillard says,

On the whole I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what kind of conditions we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are like children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness (she says) to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.

Look around. Do you see any indication that there is anything dangerous or even unpredictable going on around us today? To my way of thinking, that lack of an air of danger is one of the saddest things about modern American Christianity.

The Holy Spirit – that incredibly powerful, unpredictable and dangerous aspect of God – *IS* here today. Each of us was given the gift of that Spirit at our Baptism. Every Sunday we confess during our creed and Eucharistic prayers that Jesus is Lord. And St. Paul said in his first letter to the Church in Corinth, “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” Truly the Spirit *is* alive, well and “in da house” this morning. But I believe that we have set up barriers which keep us from truly perceiving the Spirit and more importantly keep us from exercising the power of the Spirit in our lives.

One of the barriers is simply a lack of faith. Remember that “faith” is defined as trusting in that which cannot be seen. In this post-modern age, we have “faith” in

science; in mathematics; even in mass communication (ridiculous though that may be); but not in the Spirit. I've heard it said that, instead of being like little children – which is how Jesus told us we should approach Him – we are “above” that kind of thinking; “beyond” believing that God’s invisible power could possibly be active in our lives. In this way we are like kindling that has gotten wet. The spark provided by the Holy Spirit is present, but this soggy condition of our own making won’t allow us to catch fire.

But even if we have “faith” in the Spirit, another barrier is that we don’t *expect* the Spirit to enter our lives. Think of a time when a young person came to you with a school fundraiser. Instead of being like the well trained Girl Scout who asks how many boxes you want to buy, this child came to your door and said, “I’m selling candy for my school. You don’t want to buy any, do you?” We can be like that child. He didn’t expect to make the sale, and therefore did not. We don’t expect to experience any “real” power of the Spirit, and therefore don’t.

But for many of us, the real barrier is simply a lack of awareness or recognition. The Spirit is there – we just don’t recognize it. There is a story of Jules Spach, whose plane was shot down off the coast of Italy, in World War II. He parachuted safely into the sea and he could see land, but it was very far away. Jules says that he began to swim toward the land, but very soon he felt utter exhaustion set in. As he struggled to swim, or even stay afloat (in those days before modern life preservers), he recognized that he was in real trouble and he began to wonder what it would be like to drown; what it would be

like to be dead. Then, to his amazement, an unexpected, *unrequested* strength came into him and he began to swim again – this time effortlessly – until he reached the beach and relative safety. Jules Spach, who prior to that day had not been a particularly deep believer, became convinced that it was the power of the Holy Spirit that gave him the unexplainable strength. And that awareness gave his life purpose. He became a missionary to Brazil and after his return to the U.S., he was ultimately elected Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church US.

Our lives are filled with choices. We can choose to be fearful of the power of the Spirit. If we so choose, we will snicker when our Pentecostal friends tell us about people in their congregations who have been healed through prayer and we will never pray for anyone else's healing. We can refuse to believe in the power of the Spirit – in which case we will give more time and effort to reading romance novels or balancing our checkbooks than we will to what is in the Good Book, because what is the point of knowing what's in the Bible when it's all about things that happened a long time ago, not about what is happening now.

Or we can choose not to see or acknowledge the power of the Spirit at work in the world. And that is the saddest of all cases.

Shane Claiborne, one of the founders of a group called the Christian Way, has said,

We need (the) power (of the Spirit) if we're going to be part of a church that brings life, joy and fulfillment to the world around us. The problem with traditional (by that he means, "modern") Christianity, you see, is that it

focuses more on life *after* death than on improving the quality of life *before* death.

Don't get me wrong, (he says) I'm excited about the afterlife. And yet I am convinced that Jesus came not just to prepare us to die but to teach us how to live.

I agree with Shane. Jesus sent His Holy Spirit to be our advocate, comforter and TEACHER. The power of the Spirit is here today. It is unpredictable. It is perhaps dangerous. It is decidedly powerful. Open up and let it in. *Believe* that it is real. *Recognize* its arrival. *Embrace*, but do not try to control, its power. Learn to live in the power of the Spirit of God. And work to bring the Kingdom of God to perfection here and now. It is what Pentecost is all about. Amen.