

Homily for The Day of Pentecost June 4, 2017

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Numbers 11:24–30

Acts 2:1–21

John 20:19–23

I want to invite up Kathy to share her short reflection on the reading from Acts.

A marvelous thing has happened here:

- First, a number of our friends offered their gift of language to help illustrate this amazing sign of the Holy Spirit—that is, the apostles miraculously speaking in languages that were not their own;
- Second, Kathy offered her personal reflection on “hearing . . . and understanding;”
- Third, I got a great set up for my homily. Thank you all.

In the reading from Acts, we heard how God did something outstandingly “God-ish.” that is, God did a 180°—God briefly undid that whole Tower of Babel thing. God undid the scattering of people, . . . undid the division caused by differing languages. — God did a “180°.”

What??!! God did a “180°,” had a change of mind!?!? Really!?!? . . . Well, it is God’s world after all where God can do what God wants to do. And as NCIS’s Gibbs is so fond of saying—“my house, my rules.”

Now if it sounds as if I am laughing, I laugh not at God but at our presumptions that we can always know what God will do.

Here, God has the messengers, the Apostles, speaking in differing languages so as to unite rather than divide. God is making sure that everyone in this cosmopolitan gathering in downtown Jerusalem is, as we say, reading off the same page. God is making sure that everyone present clearly understands, beyond all doubt, the message of the good news of God’s deeds of power through Jesus Christ . . . no translator mistakes, no syntactical confusion, no “well-you-know-what-I-mean” assumptions.

I think we understand that every language embeds its own cultural biases in its vocabulary, its idioms, and its syntaxes. So if you want THE MESSAGE—and I use capital letters here—to get across without error of interpretation, you use the 1st century equivalent of Star Trek’s Universal Translator—you use the Spirit-filled Apostles speaking in the language of each person present.

Kathy in her brief reflection of “hope,” of “what if” reiterated that unifying sense of deep understanding. Thank you Kathy for sharing that reflection.

The gift of the Holy Spirit that Apostles received was the ability to briefly speak in languages they didn’t know. And that’s just what they did. And that leads me to the next bit of my homily.

You were given candles when you came in. If you don’t have one please raise your hand and Laurie or Bob can get one to you. While your candles are being lit I’ll continue.

Think of your now-lit candle as being your Gift of the Holy Spirit from God. Just recall the image of the “divided tongues as of fire.”

The gift of the spirit of God in the reading from the Old Testament and the gift of the Holy Spirit in the reading from Acts and the Gospel of John have something in common

(besides using words in Hebrew or Greek that mean both wind/breath and spirit) the gifts inspire the recipients to act. And I remind you that “inspire” also has to do with being filled with the wind/breath or the spirit.

Listen again to the three examples we heard in today’s readings:

- From the reading in the Old Testament, Numbers (11:24–30)—the action that the spirit of God inspired was to prophesy, to speak out against injustice. I’m paraphrasing a bit here for clarity: ^{v24} Then the LORD came down in the cloud . . . and took some of the spirit that was on (Moses) and put it on the seventy elders (gathered in the Tent of Meeting); and when the spirit rested upon them they prophesied. ^{v27} . . . (then) a young man ran and told Moses, “(the Elders) Eldad and Medad are prophesying (on their own) out in the camp.” ^{v29} . . . (Moses responded) “Would that all the LORD’S people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them.”
- From the Reading from Acts (1:1–21)—the action that was inspired by the Holy Spirit was to evangelize, spread the Good News. Again, I’m editing and condensing a bit here for clarity: ^{v4} All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them the ability. ^{v11} . . . “in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”
- And, finally, in the Gospel of John (20:19–23)—the action that the Holy Spirit inspired here was to serve just as Jesus did. And with no editing of the Gospel here!: ^{v21} Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ^{v22} When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ^{v23} If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

To reiterate, in each lesson we heard this morning, those who received the “spirit of God,” or the “Holy Spirit” from God were charged with a task: to prophesy; to evangelize (tell the Good News); or to be sent out to serve and pastor to the world, just as Jesus was sent to do.

It’s a wonderful thing to receive the Holy Spirit, to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. But God clearly doesn’t want it to end with that, just “receiving.” This Gift of the Holy Spirit (and I’m thinking the word “gift,” could almost be as a person) “Gift” wants us to actually do something.

You and I have been given this wonderful Gift of the Holy Spirit at our baptism. But I wonder just how much thought we’ve given to what we might do with our gift?

Let’s recall what we were asked to do by the Baptismal Covenant (BCP pg304ff). And do note the “action words.”

“Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?”

or this, “Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?”

or this, “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”

or this, “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?”

Before we each blow out the candle that we hold in our hand, the flame of which symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit, let’s pause for a moment to think, or pray, about what we have done or will do with our Gift from the Holy Spirit.

Amen