

Pentecost, Year B  
 May 24, 2015  
 (The Rev.) Steven R. Strane

If you're driving a thirty-three hundred pound car down a wet, windy road, the worst thing imaginable is to realize that you are out of control. The most frightening thing for parents rearing a 17 year-old adolescent is to have to admit that this teenager is out of control. For the patient who is waiting for the pathology report, the moment of reckoning comes when she has to acknowledge that there is nothing she can do. She is out of control.

Out of control. It's a scary thought. If we're in the game, and if we've got anything going for ourselves, we don't want to be out of control. We want to shape our own destiny. We want to guide our kids along the right path. We want to manage our physical and mental health. We want to direct the course of our personal relationships. We want to be in control.

And we're not. We have a part to play, and it's an important part. We have a lot of influence on the shape and content of our lives, for good or ill, but in a fundamental, foundational sense, we are not in control. That's the reality we have come here to celebrate today. And if we're not able to *celebrate* it, maybe we can at least begin to acknowledge it. Do you think we're ready to do that?

That's an important question for all of us, but it will be especially important for the parents of the children who will be baptized this morning. This is a tough question, especially coming about 10 minutes before your children are baptized, but it's a real question and it's a fair one. Are you ready? This is your precious, treasured child. You have longed for this child and you love this child more than your own life. Are you ready to accept this morning that this child is not your own? Will you be able to watch as your child is marked with the sign of the cross and accept that Jesus Christ has laid first and final claim on your child? That's what today is all about. It's not about family tradition. It's not about a sweet and sentimental ceremony. It's not about magic or superstition or what some people call heavenly fire insurance. Today is a day for acknowledging that in an ultimate sense we are not in control.

Today is the culmination of a great drama in three parts. It began 50 days ago with our celebration of

the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. When everything else had failed, when we wouldn't listen and we couldn't understand, God took flesh as Jesus Christ and came to save us. And we said, "No thank you," and destroyed the gift.

But God would not take no for an answer. God wouldn't leave it at that. So 50 days ago we celebrated Easter, new life for Jesus and new life for each of us who is willing to take and claim it as his or her own. Forty days after Easter the drama continued with part two. The Church celebrated the Ascension of Jesus to heaven where he now reigns in glory with God the Father. But before he went, we heard him promise that he would not leave us powerless and comfortless and on our own.

Today, on Pentecost, the drama concludes as we celebrate the fulfillment of Christ's promise. Today we celebrate the birthday of the Church and the gift of the Holy Spirit of God.

But how will we know the Holy Spirit has come? How will we know we have received the gift? Maybe we'll hear a mighty, rushing wind, or see the tongues of fire coming down. Maybe we'll break out in spontaneous, ecstatic speech. Or maybe the gift will be given imperceptibly, touching us gently at the center of our soul. Maybe the Holy Spirit will whisper into our lives as she will whisper into the lives of these children. "You are my beloved child. I loved you before you were conceived in your mother's womb, and I will always love you. I have claimed you as my royal possession forever and ever."

So we don't know if the gift of the Spirit will be manifested as a windy, fiery, mighty power, or so gently and quietly that we don't even know that the gift has been given. But if we want to know if anything has happened, if we want a sign that we have been changed, then we should look for what happened in this morning's reading from The Acts of the Apostles. The reading from Acts describes the celebration of the Festival of Weeks, or Shavuot, in Jerusalem. This is the festival we know as Pentecost. The Festival of Weeks was the commemoration of the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. It was also the celebration of the first fruits of the wheat harvest.

At the time of this festival, which is one of the three great pilgrim festivals (Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot), every able-bodied Jewish male was expected to

journey to Jerusalem to present two loaves of bread as an offering during worship in the temple. So Jerusalem was teeming with people, devout Jews from “every nation under heaven,” according to Acts. And the disciples of Jesus were part of that crowd. Before his Ascension, Jesus had told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. And as they waited, the reading tells us that there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and a tongue of fire rested on the head of each of the disciples. They were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak in other languages. So here’s the scene: There were thousands of people from throughout the region, different countries, cultures and languages, and as the disciples began to speak, this huge, diverse crowd not only heard them, but they understood. Someone in the crowd asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?”

That question actually probably sounded like this: *[desultory tone]* Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?

Did you hear disdain or disgust? The Galileans were not held in high regard. They were considered to be low class and unsophisticated. Jesus was a Galilean. Do you remember Nathaniel’s response when Philip told him that they had found Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth? Nathaniel asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

So these low-life, no-account Galileans started to speak and everybody understood them. If we want to know if anything has happened, if we want to know if we have been changed, this is the question we should ask ourselves: Can we understand one another? Human beings are collected in groups in a myriad of different ways, in different nations, cultures and clans, in different political parties, religious traditions and interest groups.

The potential for misunderstanding within and among all of those different groups is great, but it’s impossible for me to imagine that it could be any greater than the potential for misunderstanding among the thousands who were gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of Weeks. The potential was great, but they understood one another.

By the grace of God, and because of the gift of the Holy Spirit, they understood one another.

As we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, let this be our prayer:

Maranatha! Come Holy Spirit, quickly come. Help us to understand. Help us to understand one another, and help us to understand that you are in control. Let your love burn within us to cleanse us from every impurity that separates us from each other and from you. Come, Holy Spirit, and make us your own. Amen.

© St. James by-the-Sea Episcopal Church  
La Jolla, California