

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector

St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina, on the Day of Pentecost (15 May 2005):

Acts 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:4-13; John 20:19-23

With the Spirit's Passion

Most of us have been to church before on the Day of Pentecost. Most of us have heard this description from St. Luke's portrayal in the Acts of the Apostles. Admittedly, it can be easy for us to skate over this day. Yet, as I was reading this lesson again and paying closer attention to its details, I was struck by the vigor and passion of the account.

For instance, the first thing Luke tells us is that the post-resurrection group of Jesus' followers was all in one place. They had not dispersed or given up, but obeyed the Lord's command to remain in the Jerusalem and wait with great expectation for what God would do next. This is to say that they gave themselves the opportunity to listen to God, to pay attention to God. Contrary to the prevailing American cultural perspective (where we are encouraged to stay busy and to "do our own thing") following Jesus, being an Easter person, requires listening, and it requires community.

It requires community largely because none of us, in actuality, is a hero; and this means that we need the support and comfort of one another's presence and example so we don't get lost, wandering off on our own – or worse yet – so we don't run away as soon as we get confused or fearful. You see, the original disciples had learned, from painful and embarrassing personal experience, that being in one place together, helping each other to listen, was a necessity, if they were going to be able to follow Christ.

Immediately after this community element is named, we hear of a second characteristic that shaped our spiritual forebears. A great sound from heaven came upon them, like the sound of a mighty wind.

I still remember with awe Labor Day of 1998. It was just after 5:00 in the morning, when my family and I were awakened with a shock to a roaring sound. It sounded like a jet plane outside our window, but its thundering didn't pass over head but lasted twenty-seven minutes. Winds of nearly 100 miles per hour tore through out community, the result of a severe wind sheer condition. Cold air from the north was temporarily trapped atop the hot summer air that had hovered over the ground. When the weight of the cold air fell down," tremendous amounts of energy ripped through the sky, and quite literally, "the sound of it filled the whole house."

In the biblical tradition it is always helpful to note that the English words for "wind," "breath," and "spirit" are the same word in both Hebrew and Greek. So that when we use one of these words in our English translations, the other two are always implied. God's Spirit is God's Wind is God's breath: energy breaking in, shaping and reshaping what is, inspiring and propelling.

The next characteristic that Luke describes on the original Pentecost Day was that tongues of fire appeared to the disciples and rested upon each one of them.

As with wind, fire has a double life. It can promote, but it can also harm. In this case, the mysterious tongues of fire do both. The Spirit's fire burns away what keeps us from God, and the tempering flame also strengthens the souls of believers because those who receive such a spiritual baptism are being reborn – flame hardened for new life and for useful service.

The last quality that is described in these opening lines of today's scripture refers to the amazing fact that in the midst of all this, the disciples began to speak in ways that transcended the barriers of language and experience. Even foreigners visiting Jerusalem for the post-Passover festival heard these newly commissioned disciples speaking about the mighty works of God. Remarkably, the message was absolutely clear to all.

Gathered together in one place, God's Holy Spirit blew through the lives of Jesus' followers like a summer storm, sweeping away the stuffy old air and opening both the house and their hearts to that which is fresh and new and alive, to that which is of God. The result was that those who followed Jesus and who had come to know the reality of his resurrection were charged now to go out and represent the Christ in the world with the Good News.

"Pentecost" is a Greek word that means the "fiftieth day." Originally, Pentecost was a Hebrew festival, falling fifty days after the Passover, and celebrating the first fruits of the harvest. Christians took the name because this is the same day that the Holy Spirit descended upon the followers of Jesus, a harvest of a different kind. For Christians, Pentecost concludes the season of Easter, and the church takes this occasion to mark its own genesis, reminding us that the "church" is not a building but people, people who choose to be living, breathing, energized ambassadors of Christ in the world. You and I share in all this through our Baptisms, which is the reason we focus on Baptism in today's liturgy.

But now I need to raise a question with you. Before we baptize four-year old Reid Sprankle, before we make promises to him before God, the church, and his family and friends, I need to know something. Do we really want a church like the one we have heard described in Acts?

Oh, I know how exciting it sounds to have God's air blow through the staleness of our routine. But you know that this divine wind is no store-bought fan, where you can control the air with the flick of a switch. And tongues of fire: Tell me about it. I happen to be the resident expert on fire. You bet I remember how exciting it was, when I inadvertently flung the incense onto the sanctuary rug and it started to burn and smolder and smoke. Those tongues of fire caused acolytes to stomp and hop around the altar so that some in the congregation started to think that we were having a little Pentecostal witness going on in this stayed Episcopal Church.

Oh yes, I remember that little, biddy fire: "Look it that, Floyd, that Rector's makin' more changes: got 'em dancing for the opening hymn. I knew we should never have called a Yankee to be our Rector!"

What kind of church do we want to be? How much of God's wind and fire do we want around? Do we want to be a church that willingly steps outside the predictable? Are you sure that you want to be that adventurous? Do you really want to feel God's wind in your face; or would that muss up your hair? Do you really want the tempering strength of the Spirit's fire; or might we start to wheeze from the smoke? And speaking of things like this, do you really want to get into the waters of your Baptism; or will that be a bit too much?

My point on this Day of Pentecost is to ask you: Do we want to be a church that expects the miraculous power of God? Do we want to be a church that not only expects miracles but consciously makes room for them? Is it worth the windy noise? Is it worth the cauterizing fire? Is it worth getting wet over?

By God's grace, St. Martin's purpose is to equip Christ's disciples: To Love; To Grow; To Serve.

On the day that many refer to as "the birthday of the church," it is important to take stock of what kind of church we want to be? On a day when we not only celebrate Pentecost but baptize a child and celebrate the ministry and presence of our youth, what do you say? What kind of church are we to be?

I know that over 100 of you have given an answer. That's the number of parishioners that participated in last year's "Visioning Process," which gave birth to our "Vision Plan." That's where our purpose statement came from, the one that I just read to you, which is the same one that is at the top of your bulletin heading and hangs over the entrance to the parish offices. But my question to you is not really about "purpose statements" and public banners. What kind of church do you want to be is really about how much passion you want to have our relationship with God in Christ? How much of God's wind will we let in? How much of God's strengthening and cleansing fire will we tolerate? Who will speak about the mighty works of God beyond 5220 Clemson Avenue? Where is our passion for Christ?

Passion: that's what I think about when I hear the description of Pentecost. Passion. Energy. Wind. Fire. Proclamation. Mighty Works.

As a Christian, what passion do others see in you, when it comes to God in Christ? What passion do you think our kids see, when they turn to us as the church? What passion will Reid inherit from his life at St. Martin's? What passion keeps our teens engaged, when all around them they are told to chase after selfish goals? Do they see more than us going through the motions? Let me tell you two quick stories about our youth and the kind of passion they more often than not are exposed to.

Two months ago, I read an article from my successor in New York. In the parish newsletter, he reported that the local clergy group had invited a sociologist from the University to speak at their monthly meeting. She was an expert on "teen culture," having, in fact, just completed a study on the local population. Now, this New York population shares a very similar demographic to our own community here: suburban, prosperous, achieving, successful. What the sociologist's fact-finding discovered, among other things, was the behavior of the kids. The study found that in the teen culture, two behaviors were on the rise. One was the use of heroine. The other was gambling.

Incredibly, heroine is now the excitement drug. It is cheap, readily available, and effective. It is one way to take away the emptiness, but, of course, its impact is only temporary in this regard, and its consequence creates an emptiness that is pure hell in the long run. Gambling is also a hot issue among the teens. Some kids make up to \$1000 a weekend gambling, and some parents encourage it as a way to pay for college.

Passion.

The other story comes from last month's news, when the FDA was considering its ban on silicon breast implants. A plastic surgeon from Texas was interviewed about his practice and experience. Among the things this surgeon said in the broadcast report was that he performs about 15,000 breast implant procedures each year, and he charges \$3,000 for each one. Obviously, he makes a good living, but from this he said that it was not uncommon for parents to give a breast implant gift to their teenaged daughters for a sixteenth birthday present or for high school graduation.

As a father who has experienced (and I think survived) three teenagers, I very clearly do recognize that kids rarely listen to you, but they do watch what we do. They watch for our passion. Somehow, lots of kids have learned that the emptiness they feel inside needs to be filled up or numbed up. No one, evidently, has told them – or more significantly shown them by example – that this space will never be filled up because it is for God. As such, this space needs to be tended prayerfully, quietly and together, not fearfully manipulated with substances, or money, or a “D” cup.

Passion. Where do we get passion for God? How do we reignite our spirits with the Holy Spirit? What I see is this.

Many in my generation, who are now parents, are not very sure about how to answer these questions or what to do with the holy space inside. Either they were never shown much about mature spirituality by their parents or in their adolescent wisdom (now there's an oxymoron!) they rejected what their parents offered. But now, as we try to parent our own kids, we realize that something is missing, something very important, something life-changing, something life-saving. We realize – in one way or another – that the emptiness never goes away, and some of us are beginning to sense that maybe that space does belong to God. But we're not sure how to go from here. Nonetheless, I can assure you that it's not about hiring a second priest to do our spiritual work.

Spiritual passion. Spiritual maturity.

What amazes me – and frustrates me, too -- about this situation is that very few parents are saying out loud: “This matters, and I need to learn about it now, and I want to learn about spiritual passion and maturity with you, my dear son, my precious daughter.” Sadly, I don't see very many parents – very many adults -- being that honest.

If we were, several things would happen in our midst. First, adults (in general) and parents (in particular) would begin to emerge as reliable “grown ups,” due to their personal commitment “To Love; To Grow; To Serve.” (Have you noticed how rare it is to find a “grown-up”? There are lots of old people but very few “grown ups.”)

The second thing that would occur in our midst is that a great deal of healing would happen, especially between parents and teens. And the third thing that would happen when spiritual passion and maturity are sought is that the church, our church, would take a quantum leap forward in terms of its health and joy.

Pentecost. Passion. Power. New Life.

It is what Easter is about. The resurrection isn't just about Jesus any more. It's about us. It's about now. What will we do? Do we want to let God's wind in, God's fire burn, God's mighty acts to be seen? What kind of church do you want to be? What kind of life do we want to have?

Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire, and lighten with celestial fire. Amen.