

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 (27 May 07):  
 Acts 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12-13; John 20:19-23

## The “Conspirators”

Life is complex. It is rarely a matter of things occurring in sequence, one manageable thing at a time. No, life's complexity frequently expresses itself in terms of overlapping events and things. Sometimes this overlapping can get out of control and overwhelm us, until like an angry sea the amassing wave action builds and builds and knocks us over.

It seems to me that as we gather on this Sunday for worship, the overlapping waves of events are more poignant today than they otherwise seem to be. For instance, this is the Day of Pentecost, the culmination of what began fifty days ago, with Jesus' resurrection. Throughout this time, we have consistently proclaimed the fullness of Easter in its three, overlapping and sequential parts.

This is to say that initially we announced with great joy that in Christ's triumphant rising, the eternal truth was revealed: that God's love is stronger than fear and death. In Jesus' resurrection, true life has been cracked open to make visible what life with God is like: that death is real, but it is not the end.

Then in Christ's Ascension, we glimpsed the second overlapping part of the Easter message: that our destiny is to be in communion with

our God, that life with God is our legacy, our destiny, our hope. We are not left to fend for ourselves but are given – even now – a partner's share in eternal life.

And this brings us to this day, the third part of Easter's reality. Christ gives his followers the gift of the Holy Spirit and empowers those of us who treasure him with the ability to be his Body in the world. St. Augustin teaches that what we are called to remember about this day is that you and I have been given access to the same relationship that the Father and Son share – a relationship that is perfect love and life, a relationship Jesus would rather die for than dishonor or break.

But our life is complex; we become dispersed or even distracted with all the overlapping claims and events. For instance, this is the Memorial Day weekend, a holiday that announces the commencement of the summer season. This weekend has also held our high school graduations. As I say, overlappings: life is complex.

Sometimes these overlappings coincide, and we can easily tend them. So it is that I am pleased that some of our community can retreat with family and friends for a long weekend's respite. I am happy for our fifteen high school seniors who

have graduated this past week and share in the pride of their parents and families at this threshold in their lives.

These two complexities are easy to take and to tend, but there has also been one other complexity in the past week, which has not been so easy.

For this parish community, the jury's verdict that convicted Dewain Herring is not something that is easily absorbed. For months now, I have wondered about what I might say to you at this moment. Not many of us considered that during the last week of Easter one of our own would be convicted of murder and sentenced to thirty years in prison. Not many of us can take such stunning news in stride and continue without asking some hard questions about what we saw and learned and felt during the trial. Perhaps not many of us have given much thought to what this conviction might have to do with Pentecost, with us, with our life together; but in my position, I have needed to think about such things. My remarks this morning stem from these reflections.

The first thing I want to say is that given all these complexities I am quite literally impressed by the opening reading's description of the first Pentecost event. I find in it a kind of template of what it means to be Easter people, what it means to be the church, what it means to be St. Martin's, what it means to live faithfully and fruitfully in the midst of all life's complexity.

The opening line of the Acts lesson states that when the day of Pentecost arrived, the disciples were together in one place. The act of gathering together functions as the catalyst for everything else that happens, including the offering of the Holy Spirit. This description of the followers of Jesus gathering is deceptively simple and profound, and it dramatizes what you and I have said over and over again. Show up! The necessity and importance of showing up is what hits me today, from the standpoint both of the lessons and of the complexities of the week.

For instance, showing up is what is fundamental to Christian worship. It is the most important thing that we do, but not for the reason most seem to have in mind. The primary reason to come to church has nothing to do with getting inspiration. It has nothing to do with learning anything. It has nothing to do with receiving comfort or support. No, the primary reason for worship is because Jesus has promised that whenever two or three of us *gather* in his name, God and God's life will be in our midst.

What this means is that our primary job in worship is to remember this promise, to gather because of it, and to act on it by creating room for God. Therefore, primarily speaking our worship is a reality test, where we gather together (at least two or three of us) to remember God and to experience what the God-life in Christ is all about.

Once we do that, we can and do have all kinds of responses and feelings to this divine reality test. We may be

inspired but just as easily be challenged. We may learn something but just as easily be confounded. We may feel comfort and reinforcement but just as easily sense our need for transformation.

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. [Acts 2:1]*

Showing up, being all together in one place, matters. As Woody Allen has correctly opined: “90% of life is in the showing up.” “Be there, aloha!”

Nonetheless, because life is complex, because our lives are complex, it is not always easy or convenient – or at times much fun -- to show up and to be counted in relationship; but it is crucial that we do. For we are called to take our place in making room for God’s presence so that in our midst we may see and taste and touch and hear and smell what life with God is like and to do so because God in Christ has given us this life.

I have tried to remind you consistently of how this showing up and being in relationship works. On one hand, each of us can identify at least one person, whose presence in our lives – whose presence in church – gives us added ballast. It matters to see him; it matters to see her; it matters to see them. Their presence is a loud, wordless testimony to us: that we are not alone; that we are not on our own.

Yet, on the other hand is the equally poignant reality that we are prone to ignore more than the first. You never know whose eyes are searching for your presence. One very rarely

realizes who is counting on your presence for support, for reinforcement. We rarely consider how God uses our presence to create the appropriate mix, by which the Holy One is present and known and active.

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.*

And because of this, God acted. God gave Jesus’ followers the divine power of creation, itself; and for that inaugural moment everyone could see what a redeemed creation looked like. Everyone could hear in plain and familiar words the truth of the Gospel of love and life. Everyone was seared by the cauterizing Spirit of God. Suddenly and for ever, it was no longer about what Jesus would do. Suddenly and for ever, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, it was now and always about whether people like you and me would dare to do what Jesus had done, would dare to be instruments of Jesus’ light and life, dare to be the hands and feet, the eyes and ears of the kingdom.

It was the day of Pentecost, and they were all together because together is how God works. It is how life emerges; it is how life evolves; and it is how life becomes perfect in the kingdom.

Faithful community is not about doing your own thing; nor is faithful community about always agreeing. This is the main reason being the church is often so hard. As my old seminary professor, Henri Nouwen said: “[community is] that place

where the person you least want to live with always lives.”

And here is my main point to you on the Day of Pentecost. Being together gives us permission to be a community, a community knit together, not by us but by the Holy Spirit of God. Therefore, a community is not primarily about being friendly to one another, although – obviously – friendliness may be an abundant part of coming together in community. Yet, friendliness and community should not be confused. Inhabiting the same space on a given Sunday morning is not the same as belonging to and being a part of a community. No, community is where (as one commentator put it) “your presence truly matters to others and their presence truly matters to you.” (Peter Marty, *Christian Century*, 8/23/05, p 8)

This is the way members of a congregation reproduce the love of God, through their willingness to show up. It’s not about them. It’s about God. Through the offering of our presence, the love and hospitality of God is manifest; and our gathering becomes the Body of Christ and not just a religious club. Only then are lives changed. Only then do tongues of fire dance. Only then do strange languages become clear. Only then does hope abide.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century, American Jesuit priest and scholar, John Courtney Murray is quoted as saying that the early church was a “conspiracy.” By this, he meant that the ancient believers “breathed together” – (*con* meaning “with” and *spire* meaning to breathe.”) (*Christian Century*, 8/23/05, p.9) I

make this point on the Day of Pentecost to say that as we gather with the intention of making room for God, we are conspirators!

We are people who gather in order to “breathe together” the air of the kingdom. We come here to breathe deeply of the reality of resurrection, to fill our lungs with its hope and its strength and its vision. And we leave here, we leave this gathering, knowing that our presence matters – to God and to this broken world. For we breathe Easter deeply in order to put fear and death in their proper places. Because we gather together in holy “conspiracy,” we place ourselves in a position to do what Jesus has done.

Please: It is never a matter of asking “WWJD.” We already know what Jesus would do. He raises the dead. He heals the sick. He frees the captive. He restores sight to the blind. And so do we – so do we -- as we gather together as his holy conspirators.

I close with this report of the faithful “conspiracy” that is ours with one last example. As hard and as disturbing as Dewain Herring’s conviction and imprisonment are – and they are very hard and very disturbing – St. Martin’s has been a place of holy conspiracy, where God’s air has been breathed and shared with Dewain and with Ginia. In the midst of this trial, members of this community have shown up to minister to Dewain and to Ginia. They have arrived as co-conspirators, breathing deeply the kingdom air and by their presence reminding Dewain and Ginia to do the same.

And if any one chose to look, things have changed not only with the Herrings but also with all who were involved, as if tongues of fire danced on their very ordinary heads because in the words of their mouths and in the actions of their hearts, God's new life emerged.

God's life emerged, and through this ordinary presence years of blindness were overcome. A lifetime of fragmentation was bridged. Fear's isolating and infuriating power was confronted, and there was community – no matter what. Not just friendliness but a genuine realization that presence matters because it is what is between us that is sacred.

Dewain has paid a terrible price for his awakening. It is a death – for him and for us. But he knows now how to breathe deeply; and no one can take that fresh and holy air away. He and Ginia learned this here.

My co-conspirators: come together; breathe deeply the air of new life. Don't take this life for granted. Don't waste it. No matter what happens, no matter how complex things get, we are here at the real "ground zero" – God's altar, where we are given what we need and cannot give to ourselves and where, in joyful thanksgiving we breathe deeply God's holy air and – consequently, mysteriously, powerfully – become Christ for a needy and broken world.

It is what we are meant to be. It is what we are; but it takes one another to gather together in order to do it and to *con-spire* with God's Spirit for God's holy and lasting life.

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.