

Romans 8:22-27
John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

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Day of Pentecost
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OUR NEGLECTED FRIEND

“Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” *John 16:7*

Christians tend to clump together by type, historically by social standing, education, ethnicity or national culture. Like cosmic dust condensing out of the primordial soup, iron atom gravitating to iron atom, nickel to nickel, gold to gold, then to coalesce in rich veins of ore in the cooling planet, so we Christians tend to clump; Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Baptist. Less, as in former days following family tradition, more now by style, by what seems to fit who we are. So we don't find too many radical Pentecostal snake handlers in a high church Episcopal Eucharist, or fire-breathing pulpitering in a mainstream Protestantism. However, in our allegiance to the style and substance that best fits us, we've rather badly dismembered the Holy Trinity. Pentecostals, Charismatics, and many of the Orthodox tradition have, in various ways elevated the Holy Spirit above the person of Jesus and God the Creator. Meanwhile, evangelicals, Baptists, the independent free churches and others have canonized up the person of Jesus as predominant above the Spirit and the Creator. Presbyterians, Anglicans and such have similarly placed emphasis on God the “Father,” the creator to the neglect of the other two. For us, then, the Holy Spirit—too narrowly identified with arm waving and glazed-eye-rolling Pentecostals, has become for us something of an awkward first cousin whom we hope doesn't turn up at homecoming and embarrass the party. We just don't seem to lean easily that way, as though, and I'm not being cynical—we are just wired a bit differently.

But, in that self selected awkwardness regarding the Holy Spirit, we end up missing something very profound, the energy and vitality of the universal spirit at the core of our historic faith. God isn't a multiple choice question: father, Son, or Holy Spirit, but all three. As the 5th century Chalcedonian Confession struggled to articulate its belief in the humanity and divinity of Jesus, it obfuscated,

“in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence.”

Today is Pentecost, the birthday of the church, by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is ironic that the church began, not with Jesus, but precisely in his physical absence, his leaving! The church is Christ *absent* in the flesh, but present in his followers—that’s *us*. This is how Jesus makes the point on the night before the crucifixion in the very room which, seven weeks later, the church will be born. “Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7).

As B.F. Westcott puts it, “The disciples were deceived by the superficial appearance of things.” The Advocate, the Comforter, Jesus calls the Spirit. The wrenching irony is that if Jesus is to be available beyond the little confine of this band of followers, he has to go away. Then the disciples and everyone else will be obliged to seek out the Spirit, into whose presence his absence invites them. This is not easy for many of us. As Goethe noted, “What we do not understand we do not possess,” we tend to fear.

No one knows the precise year, but the Book of Acts records it as a night not unlike last night’s storm, when the energy of the Spirit rushed into the room where trembling disciples had been cloistered for weeks, fearful of reprisals by the authorities. A night so profound with the unleashing of Jesus’ Spirit on the world that it blew the doors off the hinges of people’s souls, and flame-like tongues anointed their fearful heads. Jerusalem was a very cosmopolitan community with Jews from an astonishing number of regions gathered there. In the streets each heard their own language from the mouths of the disciples, a feat made unintelligible when pressed beyond its function as a uniting of all nations in a common praise; reversing what happened at the Tower of Babel, eons before, when the people were fragmented into *different* languages for overstepping their bounds toward God.

Language across cultures can be a tricky thing. A clergy friend of mine, Bob Young, tells of visiting a German pastor colleague in eastern Germany some years ago, who had visited Bob and Louisa in their West Chester home. He was now eager to return the hospitality. So the Youngs, traveled with friends to the now united Germany, keen to see their friend and the state of the renewed national church there, since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Knocking on the door of the pastor’s home they were greeted with great warmth and ceremony, and impatient to show off his improved English he invited his guests in, saying, “Please, please, come in, and take off your clothes.”

The power of Pentecost's Spirit to unite knows no bounds, transcending even barriers of language. A clergy colleague of my acquaintance tells of periodic visits to an elderly woman in a nursing home who was originally from Russia. She spoke virtually no English, and he spoke absolutely no Russian. When he first visited her, he tried to indicate who he was, showing his Bible and his kit for communing with the homebound. He was moderately successful, and she seemed to perceive that he was a priest or some such thing. She graciously put up with his babbling in English when he'd point to the onset of spring through the nursing home window, or give a mock shiver while stabbing a finger toward winter's ice on the trees. He could not let her know that he wished to hear *her* story, and learn about her Orthodox faith. Was she even a person of faith? Then, on one occasion, before leaving he decided, rather than offering a pastoral pray, which she could not have understood, to pray the Lord's prayer, the "Our Father." Suddenly, all confusion fell away. Whatever it was—perhaps the cadence of that universal prayer, or some hint of its phrasing, effortlessly she joined in praying as seamlessly in Russian as he did in English. And in their simultaneous "Amen/Amehn" each, by their expressions, felt a rush of oneness transcending every difference in culture, language, ideology, age (he was fifty years her junior). During most of their lives they would have been considered political enemies. Yet in that moment they both felt and warmed to a rush of uniting oneness in Christ and with each other. This is the way of the Holy Spirit.

We cannot live independently of the Holy Spirit any more than we can live without breathing. And if we acknowledge that all living things partake of a life-force, something other than a mechanistic churning of atoms, something that enables life or, at death, disables life. Then to engage or not engage this living presence is like being in the constant presence of one who secretly loves you, but will not hound you to respond. *A discreet, if neglected friend.*

Yet something still more important is at work in the unveiling of the Holy Spirit. At its core, Pentecost broke down walls of separation between peoples who were divided, symbolically in the Pentecost story, by language, and thus each with their inability to communicate their different world view. Division remains the status quo today. On a daily basis, ours is not to address national divisions on the large scale, but at the intimate level where we can make a difference, and where our silence only breeds ferment.

In a dramatic way, I learned of an instance of this last week, when a pastor in Anderson, SC, to emphasize the negative power of silence, issued every worshipper a tongue depressor at the beginning of worship. They no doubt stared at the item through the service with some amusement and curiosity until, at the end of his message, he told each person in that large congregation to write the name of someone from whom, by their silence, they were estranged. Then before they left

the sanctuary to commit to breaking the silence and resolving their division. Such is the power of the Spirit at the individual level. I imagine that Anderson SC this week is a markedly different place.

Speaking to people in a new way and “touching people with the language of love that Christ has taught us.” This we can do.

Amen.

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