

Pentecost Sunday of Easter, Sunday, June 4, 2017, Year A

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 20:19-31 and Various

"Receive the Holy Spirit"

"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (John 20:21-23) Over 40 times in the Gospels Jesus says that He has been sent from the Father – and now He says that He is sending them! He is sending us!

Can you just imagine what was going through the Apostles minds? They thought only God could forgive sins! They would be right – God is going to forgive sins – but through them! They are given this authority after they are given the promise and gift – of the Holy Spirit.

There are some people who question – well did Jesus give them the Holy Spirit then in the Upper Room – or did the Holy Spirit come on the Day of Pentecost – which we celebrate today? The answer is – Yes!

Let me try to explain it to you this way: Jesus breathed upon the Apostles – and in doing so I believe that He ‘ordained’ them to be ministers of forgiveness – but not fully receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit – like Paul describes in our second reading today from 1 Corinthians 12. I can liken it to the ordinations that we have in our churches. When someone is studying to be a priest – at the end of the process – after receiving their Masters of Divinity degree – they are ordained to be a deacon – called the Diaconate. The word Deacon comes from the Greek “*Diaconos*” which means servant. Twelve years ago tomorrow I was ordained a deacon at St. John's Cathedral in Jacksonville – with the Bishop bestowing the Holy Spirit upon me with the laying on of hands and anointing with oil - chrism. However, there were things that I could not do as a deacon that I can as a priest. Six months to a year after ordination to the Diaconate, at the discretion of the bishop, the deacon once again comes before the Bishop and is ordained to the Order of Presbyter – or Priest. For me it was December 11, 2005 and with this laying on of hands and anointing – not just by the Bishop but by all of the priests present, putting the weight of the church upon you – and trust me it is an awesome feeling. The Deacon can baptize, can marry people, can bury people, but cannot give what we used to call the “ABC's” - absolution, blessings or consecrate the bread and wine. There is a very distinct difference between a deacon and a priest. A priest wears a stole vertically while a deacon wears the stole diagonally.

When the Apostles received the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room from Jesus – that was not in the same manner in which they received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. In the Upper Room Jesus gave His breath to them – His Ruach – the Hebrew word for breath or Spirit. They received it – His breath – His Spirit – enabling them to ‘get out of the Upper Room’ and follow Him to the Galilee – where He made them breakfast on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (John 21) and asked Peter three times if he loved Jesus – undoing the three denials – and He transformed Peter from a fisherman to a shepherd. He also spoke to them atop a mountain in the Galilee as recorded in Matthew 28:17-20 saying “*All authority in heaven and on earth has*

been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." This was before Jesus ascended to the Father on the 40th day of His Resurrection. On that 40th day, before He left the Mount of Olives and went to heaven – Jesus further defined His expectations of the Apostles and told them that in just days they would receive the full anointing of power from the Holy Spirit: *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight." (Acts 1:8-9) Jesus promised the Holy Spirit, who He also called the Counselor, Comforter, and Spirit of Truth – He was just days away – from that 43rd day after Passover. They just had to wait.

Pentecost is not a Christian holiday. It is also known as Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks. It was the fiftieth day after Passover. It was an agricultural festival, when farmers brought the first sheaf of wheat from the crop, and offered it to God, as a sign of gratitude and as a prayer that the rest of the crop would be safely harvested. Both Passover and Pentecost brought to mind great memories of the story of the Exodus from Egypt, when God fulfilled His promises to Abraham by rescuing his people. Passover was the time when the lambs were sacrificed, and people recalled that they were saved by the 'blood of the lamb. The Israelites were saved from the Angel of Death who killed the firstborn of the Egyptians. The Israelites on that very night passed through the Red Sea into the Sinai desert. Then, 50 days after Passover, they came to Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Law – the 10 Commandments. That became Shavuot - the Day of Pentecost – the apostles were gathered in one place when *"Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting."* (Acts 2:2) I think it is very important for us to know that the Hebrew word for wind is the same word for 'breath' – that word once again in 'Ruach.' Would you be surprised to know that the word for Spirit is that very same word – 'Ruach'? The word for Holy is 'hakodesh' and so the Holy Spirit in Hebrew is the 'Ruach Hakodesh.' The Greek word 'Pneuma' means to breathe, blow, the wind. It is important to note that breath or the spirit which like the wind is invisible, immaterial, and powerful.

More was to happen to the Apostles that Pentecost – as they were further ordained by the Holy Spirit. *"They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."* (Acts 2:3-4) They were not only ordained that day but transformed – being filled with gifts of the Holy Spirit and their fear and doubts were removed from them and replaced with a boldness that would allow them to bear a powerful witness to the truth about Jesus and His resurrection and to 3,000 people very first day, as a sign that this is like the sheaf which was offered to God as the sign of the great harvest that was to come. That boldness and power that they received was especially evident and witnessed by those who heard them speaking in the languages of the many visitors that day who were in Jerusalem for the festival of Shavuot or Pentecost. Peter would boldly witness to the crucifixion of Jesus and proclaim

that He is alive still! Later in that same second chapter of Acts - Luke wrote that Peter's message was so powerful and clear that "*those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*" (Acts 2:41)

That day it became evident that apostles were transformed from followers to leaders of what would become 'the church.' That is why Pentecost Sunday is called 'the birthday of the Church' and we recall that by wearing red. The power that came and comes from the Holy Spirit – the wind – the Ruach was life changing – not only for the Apostles but also for those who would hear their message about Jesus of Nazareth and the eternal life that He offers to all who will believe in Him. For each believer it becomes more important that they receive the Holy Spirit who will transform you from a listless or lifeless believer into someone whose heart is on fire with the love of God.

The whole point is that, through the Holy Spirit, the creative power of God Himself, comes from heaven to earth and does its work right here in our midst. The point is to transform the earth with the power of heaven, starting with those parts of the earth which consists of the bodies, minds, hearts and lives of the followers of Jesus – as a community – the Church, also called the Body of Christ. In Acts 2:1 Luke puts emphasis on the fact that 'they were all together in one place'; and the Holy Spirit came not to divide, but to unite. The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost fulfills Jesus' promise – and the Holy Spirit will comfort and counsel – giving us the words to speak in witness to Jesus, guiding the believers in Jesus. At a recent Tuesday night Kiwanis meeting – a gentleman who is very well known and who goes next door to the Baptist church – came to me and said "Father John, I have a Sunday school lesson to teach on Sunday – and I am very afraid. I am afraid that I am not going to have the words to say" – and so we prayed. Just this last Tuesday night he came to me and grabbed my hand and said "You are not going to believe that happened;" I said – "oh yes I am!" He said "When I got there the fear was gone – the words were there and it was probably the best lesson that I have ever been a part of – not that I taught – but that I have been a part of!" I'll tell you – he was absolutely taken up by the Holy Spirit. He gives us the words to speak when we need them – when we ask Him. We can speak about Jesus guiding His believers.

That day of Pentecost the whole body of believers in Jesus the Messiah was transformed into a 'new creation' in which heaven and earth are joined together and indeed that day came the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God is at hand! Alleluia, Alleluia and Amen!