

Pentecost Sunday, Sunday, May 23, 2021, Year B

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 20:19-31 and Various

"The Precious Gift"

Jesus told His Apostles, *"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) This took place on that first Easter Sunday. Why are we going all the way back to Easter – when here we are 50 days later. Well, Jesus gave them the Holy Spirit in a special way and we are going to talk about that. Over 40 times in the Gospels Jesus proclaimed that He has been sent from the Father – and now He says that He is sending them! And for that matter - He is sending us!

Can you just imagine what must have been going through the Apostles minds? They had grown up being taught by their rabbis that only God could forgive sins! Well, God is going to forgive sins – but through them! They are given this authority after they are given the promise and the most precious gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus breathed upon the Apostles – and in doing so I believe that He ‘ordained’ them to be ministers of forgiveness – but would not be fully receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit – like Paul describes in our second reading today from 1 Corinthians 12. In the ordinations that we have in our Anglican churches, when someone is studying to be a priest – at the end of the process – after receiving their Master of Divinity degree from seminary – they are ordained to be a transitional deacon. The word Deacon comes from the Greek word *"Diaconos"* which means servant. Sixteen years ago on June 5th 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 or 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 transitional 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 it is an awesome feeling. By the way, the stole I am wearing today was given to me on December 11, 2005, and it is inscribed The Reverend John Edward Commins, and it was put on me by Marilyn, Theresa and John, and Father Neil Lebhar, who is now our bishop. He presented me to the priesthood. You only get to wear red on certain occasions in the church – Pentecost, Confirmations, and ordination. We have vocational deacons – and we have two here today – Deacon Diane and Deacon Bob. They are not continuing on toward the priesthood – they have been called to continue to be *"Diaconos"* – servants for Christ. A deacon can baptize, marry, and do funerals, but cannot give what we call the *"ABC's"* - absolution, blessings or consecration of the bread and wine. When I was ordained I served six months in Tonawanda New York alongside another deacon, a vocational deacon. When I was ordained a priest, I came back from Jacksonville, and I asked Deacon Ed – where is the holy water? He responded – *"You make the holy water!"* I was like – *"duh!"* ABC's right? 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. A priest will always remain a deacon as well as a priest. Both the deacon and the priest are

ordained to share and read the Gospel. In the Anglican Church, only ordained people are to read the Holy Gospel.

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 – transforming Peter from a fisherman to a shepherd. Jesus also spoke to them on top of 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 saying, *“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 to send them 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 patiently wait a little longer.

Pentecost is not only a Christian holiday - it is also known as Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks. It was the fiftieth day after Passover, an agricultural festival, when farmers brought the first sheaf of wheat from their 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 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, and on that very night they passed through the Red Sea into the Sinai desert on dry ground. 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) Please remember that the Hebrew word for wind is the same word for ‘breath’ – that word once again is ‘Ruach.’ The word for Spirit is that very same word – ‘Ruach’. The word for Holy is ‘Kadosh’ and “ha” is the article “the” - 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, like the wind is invisible, and powerful. I have asked before – can you see the wind? No. Can you see the effects of it? You can see the effects of it.

That Day of Pentecost, the Apostles 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 they were transformed – being filled with gifts of the Holy Spirit and their fear and doubts were removed and replaced with a boldness that would allow them to bear a powerful witness to the truth about Jesus of Nazareth and His Resurrection. That day as they witnessed to the people, who heard them speaking in the languages of the many visitors, who were in Jerusalem for the festival of Shavuot. 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) Wow – that is more than First Baptist can hold! That is more than most churches around here can hold.

The apostles were transformed from followers to leaders of the church and that is why Pentecost Sunday is called ‘the birthday of the Church’ and so we wear red. The power that came and comes from the Holy Spirit 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.

Through the Holy Spirit, the creative power of God Himself, He does His work right here in our midst, transforming the world with the power of heaven, starting with those parts of the earth with the bodies, minds, hearts, and lives of the followers of Jesus – as a community – the Church, 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 each of us the words to speak in witness to Jesus, guiding the believers in Jesus. 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. That day the precious gift of the Holy Spirit brought about the fulfillment of the words “the Kingdom of God is at hand!”