

Sermon Pentecost Sunday 2017, Year A

Acts 2:1-21

Psalm 104:25-35, 37

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

John 7:37-39

June 4, 2017

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We have arrived at Pentecost 50 days from the Easter event. Today, we celebrate and commemorate the arrival of the Holy Spirit as recorded in the Book of Acts. Before his death, Jesus promised his disciples that he would not leave them comfortless but would send his Holy Spirit, the Advocate to be with them always.

The lesson from Acts described the power of the Spirit's arrival and its first manifestation, the ability to speak and understand different languages. Remember that Jesus' disciples were not well educated or particularly learned. Many had been commercial fisherman before Jesus called them. I'm not particularly blessed with a facility for learning languages, so I can understand just how amazing the Pentecost experience must have been. People from many different languages were suddenly able to hear the disciples communicating with them in their own native languages.

Today, we celebrate the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the birth of the church with our Pentecost picnic. And at 10:30, we are celebrating the sacrament of baptism. Later this morning, the daughter of Annie Gordon and Matt Vordermark, Margaret Howard Vordermark, "Howie" will be baptized. This is a very appropriate day for baptism because we believe the Holy Spirit will come into Howie Vordermark's life at baptism. And it provides the opportunity for us to renew the promises made at our baptisms, the promises that we try to orient our lives around. At baptism the Spirit comes into our lives in a new and more powerful way and we are never the same.

But we do look the same. The arrival of the Spirit doesn't change our appearance outwardly. But we are changed. Mysteriously, we are "marked as Christ's own forever."

Our Epistle Letter of Paul speaks of baptism, (1 Cor.) "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." We become members of the body of Christ forever. Nothing we do and nothing that happens to us can change that. By being a member of the body of Christ, speaking metaphorically, we mean that we are quite mysteriously joined with Jesus through the work of the Spirit and made full members of the church.

But like the promise of TV commercials, "there's more." The Apostle Paul goes on to develop Jesus' teaching on the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In several of Paul's Epistle's he writes about gifts that we receive from the Holy Spirit. From these scriptural passages, Christians understand the spiritual gifts to be enablements or capacities that are divinely bestowed upon individuals. Because they are freely given by God, these cannot be earned or merited. Though worked through individuals, these are operations or manifestations of the Holy Spirit—not of the gifted person. They are to be used for the benefit of others, and in a sense they are granted to the church as a whole more than they are given to individuals.

Depending upon the letter, Paul's list of gifts varies. Today's lesson from 1 Corinthians is one of Paul's earliest letters and offers us one of the lists of gifts. Now the gifts of the Spirit are "the utterance of wisdom... the utterance of knowledge... faith... gifts of healing... working of miracles... prophecy... discernment of tongues... interpretation of tongues."

Paul's passage is powerful and I was taken aback as I studied it. I was struck by why we are given gifts of the Spirit. Paul said, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Lately, I have been attracted to the phrase "the common good." During the weeks of Easter in our prayers of the people when we were praying for our President, Governor and Mayor our petition was this: "For Donald, our President, for Terry, our governor, for Joan, our mayor, and for the leaders of the nations, and

for all in authority, that they may devote themselves to promoting the common good and transforming violence and inequality into peace and opportunity for all.”

So what is the Common Good? It is a Christian ethical term that has a significant history. The Common Good refers to shared or public values or interests. As in Augustine’s notion of “the advantageousness, the common participation in which makes a people.” (*City of God 19.21*) Explore this from *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, edited by James F. Childress and John Macquarrie (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1986). The Common Good has most classically been developed in Roman Catholic social teaching. The doctrine of the common good is the antithesis of Bentham’s claim that the interest of the community is simply “the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it.” Rather from the Westminster Dictionary above, the common good “insists on the conditions and institutions which are necessary for human cooperation and the achievement of shared objectives as decisive normative elements in the social situation, elements which individualism is both unable to account for in theory and likely to neglect in practice.” (*Dictionary*, p. 102)

These concepts began to be developed with Plato, then Aquinas and later by Pope Paul XXIII who taught that the Common Good provides “the whole reason for civil authorities.” (*Pacem in Terris*, par. 54). This is the Christian perspective on the mission of government.

We each receive gifts of the Spirit as God chooses. Different persons receive different gifts, but they are not ours alone. They are not for our edification, rather they are for everyone’s benefit. That is how faith works. The Spirit gives as the Spirit chooses, Paul says. We are all part of the one body. Equal members where nobody has benefits or privileges above others. St. John’s exists for all of us. But the gifts we receive differ among us.

The gifts are personal but not for our personal use. This is a tough concept in our culture which holds autonomy and individuality above other goods. The crisis our culture faces today is the crisis of colliding visions of humanity’s purposes. Ideas of individualism which have a strong basis in American history versus shared values which define the American enterprise ensconced in the

Declaration of Independence. “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal...” In a sense American life has always held a tension between support of ideas from individualism and those of the common good.

For Christians then, questions that begin in the political realm frequently have religious significance. We don’t read scripture and practice our faith on Sundays alone, but this is to inform our lives every day. And while this is not easy, it is essential to wrestle with. There will be conflicts between individualism and the common good. But Christianity will always support the common good.

Because these gifts of the Spirit are for the common good. To benefit and betterment of all. Building up the body of Christ. One person at a time. Today Howie, tomorrow who knows.

Each of us is a bearer of God’s Holy Spirit and the associated gifts of the Spirit. God’s grace has done this, freely, unearned, unmerited, and unequally.

So first, we have to recognize the gifts we have received. Then we have to realize how we are called to use them. This isn’t easy or painless. But when called to decide between the wellbeing of all or the wellbeing of one, we must consider all. The Hebrew scriptures ask, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” As Christians, Jesus teaches us to respond, yes, we are.

Christians believe that the common good goes beyond “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The theme of John’s gospel is expressed by Jesus, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” As Christians, we work together using the gifts we have been blessed with to improve the conditions of all humanity.

As I have said many times, the question is not, “What would Jesus do?” The question is, “What would Jesus have us do?” We aren’t reflecting upon the goodness of Jesus and his life and ministry. We are trying to make sense of our lives and the choices that we have to make each and every day.

These are indeed strange times in which we live, especially for American Christians. Decisions are being made (by those in leadership) that do not reflect what Jesus would have us do. This is particularly the case when it comes to health care, when it comes to welcoming the stranger, and when it comes to climate

change. In fact, next Sunday, we will hear the Genesis story of creation. Now as Episcopalians we don't believe that creation took place over seven days. But we do believe that within that story are truths that we hold dear. We believe that God created out of love. We believe that creation continues. And we believe that God has called us into vital roles as co-creators with God. From the very beginning God enlisted our support, gifted us, and calls on us to respond. We cannot choose to walk another way without disastrous consequences for our planet, for the common good, and for our souls as well.

So today, we have come to church to praise God and to also celebrate the inflowing gift of God's Holy Spirit, to pray, to learn and to be sent out into the world.

The church was born on Pentecost by the in-breaking gift of the Holy Spirit. The disciples went forth and taught and cared and served. The church came into being and continues to this day. And each of us is here by God's grace and call. And God has high hopes for us.

We are to make a difference with the gifts we have been given. We are to discern what they are and then figure how Jesus would have us use them for building up the common good. They are not for our own personal development, but the world's. Now that is a tall order. Thankfully we have the Spirit and each other to help us discern together the gifts we have received and how God may be calling us to use them.