

St. Andrew's UMC, Rev. David Park
May 11th, 2008
John 20: 19-23
"Receive the Holy Spirit"

One of the leaders of the campus ministry group at the college where I studied invited me to attend her church one Sunday. It was an interesting church: a number of people spontaneously stood up here and there during the worship and spoke in tongues. Even when the preacher preached, people would randomly rise and start babbling away. The preacher would stop each time, and wait patiently for his turn to continue.

I was also invited to the evening revival meetings that the church often held. What I remember now as coincidental was the fact that numerous preachers I heard in that church preached from the same text: Acts, chapter 2. That chapter described what happened when the Pentecost arrived.

On the Pentecost day, the Christians were shut up in a house praying. Then there was this rush of a violent wind right inside the house. The only violent wind I have ever experienced happened in New Haven, CT, when I was a student at the seminary. I was getting ready to go to Pennsylvania, in order to attend a clergy retreat. The wind was unusually strong, but little did I know that a tornado hit the town about one hour after I left. I was amazed to see all the destruction when I returned from the retreat. But I digress.

The point is that there was a great wind blowing *inside* the house, and there were a lot of people speaking in different languages. Tongues of flame licked on the people, and that bewildering scene was witnessed by astonished bystanders who saw the commotion and heard the chaotic utterances in their own native tongues.

Can you imagine what it was like to have flames leaping everywhere, strong gusts of wind blowing throughout the house, while everyone inside shouting in foreign tongues? You do not see that kind of meeting in any of the United Methodist Church, I'm sure.

That was the description of the Pentecost in Acts, the coming of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus promised in Luke chapter 24:49, before he ascended into heaven. Now, compare that scene with the account John provides in the chapter 20.

In the Gospel according to John, the Holy Spirit does not come in a spectacular manner as the account of Acts describes. In John, Jesus promised that God would send the Advocate, the Comforter, after he had been glorified.

The Holy Spirit came indeed, but in an anticlimactic manner: Jesus showed up on the evening of his resurrection, and breathed onto his disciples, and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." No rushing sound, no violent winds, no leaping flames, no foreign tongues—just a long breath of moist air on their faces. The only thing that seemed shocking was the fact that Jesus showed up live before their eyes.

According to John, that was how the Holy Spirit was given, and that was how the disciples received it. And it happened on the day of the Easter: they did not have to wait 50 days at all! This is a radical departure from the account given in the Acts: in John, Pentecost is precluded; the Easter happened in the morning, and the coming of the Holy Spirit took place in the evening of the same day.

When you think about it, you wonder why Christian churches celebrate the Pentecost based on the text of the Book of the Acts.

This Johannine account of coming of the Holy Spirit was so media-unworthy—there is nothing spectacular about it. Frankly speaking, I cannot help that the imagery of Jesus blowing onto his disciples reminds me of a birthday party where the birthday kid blows out the candles on the birthday cake. It is hard to be serious about the Pentecost with that kind of imagery.

And I can say for sure that I have never heard of a preacher preaching on the Pentecost based on the text from John chapter 20. This is the first time I am preaching on this text, so maybe this is the first time hearing for you, too. No wonder, the preachers preferred preaching from the Acts: blowing on people's faces was just not breathtaking enough.

Everyone knows that it is the character of a person, not the color of the skin, that determines the person's substance. Likewise, everyone knows the substance of a gift is not in the packaging material: it is the content of the package that matters. But does that discernment apply to the gift of the Holy Spirit as well?

Maybe the Johannine account of receiving the Holy Spirit was not exciting enough. Maybe there had to be the special effects—of the rushing wind, of the blazing fire, and of speaking in the foreign tongues—in order to add shock and awe to the whole event. Maybe that audio-visual effect is what fascinates people, and grabs their attention.

It is easy to be swept into the sensationalism surrounding the appearance of the event of the coming of the Holy Spirit. There is this spectacular effect that demands the attention of the believers. Against this, Apostle Paul warns the readers specifically in chapter 14 of his First Letter to the Corinthians:

If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind (I Cor. 14:23)?

The promise of the Holy Spirit was not just about the show. It was about the *power* of the Holy Spirit that enabled the disciples. Pentecost was not about the audio-visual presentation, but about the empowerment of the disciples through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As far as John was concerned, the empowerment that the Holy Spirit gave was the power to forgive the sins of any one. The Holy Spirit gives the believers the power to forgive sins.

Now we must make sure that we understand this correctly. If we are empowered to forgive sins and retain sins of any one, does it mean that we are given the power to choose who receives forgiveness and who shall not? Are we given the power to select willfully whom to forgive and whom to reject? Is that the intention of the gift of the Holy Spirit? Did God just empower us to reject selectively certain people from receiving God's grace?

I believe not. We are not given the power to save or condemn anyone. That power belongs only to God.

Have you tried to forgive some one who offended you? This is the litmus test for the spiritual maturity: if you are spiritually mature, then you can forgive people from your heart, and you are not embittered any more. The past wounds do not have any power over you any more—you are healed and made well, both in mind and spirit.

One New Age stuff that I cannot tolerate is this cliché: “You have to forgive yourself.” You cannot forgive yourself for the wrong you have done. If you committed sins, it is God whose forgiveness we should ask for, not one's own self.

Forgiveness is perhaps what the victim may offer to the offender, not the offender to himself. It is absolutely absurd to say, “I’ve decided to forgive myself.”

A deadbeat dad tells himself, “I’ve decided to forgive myself.” A serial killer convinces himself, “I’ve decided to forgive myself.” A child molester mutters to himself, “I’ve decided to forgive myself.” A warmonger comforts himself, “I’ve decided to forgive myself.”

There is nothing in the relationship that can be made right, if all I needed was to forgive myself. As long as I can forgive myself, I do not need to repent. The Bible assumes repentance for the forgiveness: the Bible never tells about forgiveness divorced from repentance. Forgiving oneself is a delusion, and the sin remains. It is the self-deceiving mechanism that refuses to repent—which is offensive in God’s eyes.

It is very difficult to forgive another person on one’s own will power. You may be able to forgive someone on your own will power, but it may not last. It might come back to haunt you later.

When that vengefulness or resentment resurrects at some point of life, you might regret you had forgiven too quickly that rotten degenerate. Some thing will trigger it, and the old wound is ripped open again. All the painful memories that you thought you have forgotten will rush back as fresh as the day it happened. Did it ever happen to you, or is it just me?

One needs the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, in order to forgive truly and permanently. John testifies to us that the Holy Spirit will empower us to forgive sins of anyone. The Holy Spirit empowers us to forgive those whom we can not, or *will* not, forgive.

The implication of this power is huge. This power to forgive could set us free from the past injuries that still haunt us, tormenting us and burning us. This power to forgive could restore our broken relationship, heal our wounds, quench our anger, and allow us to become God's family again. What is impossible for humankind is possible with God.

Jesus told us to leave our gifts at the altar, and be reconciled with our brother, and then come back and offer the gift (Mt. 5:23, 24). In our worship, we practice sharing peace in Jesus name, prior to our offerings, for this biblical reason.

We also bear the name, the Reconciling Congregation. It is biblical that we be reconciled with those brothers and sisters of a different sexual orientation, so that our worship may be true, in spirit, and acceptable to God. Forgiveness leads to reconciliation, and God blesses reconciled children. It is spiritual to be reconciled.

When we forgive one another, the relationship is put right in God's sight. If we are in the right relationship with God, our prayers work miracles. If there is one power God wants us to have as God's children, it is the power to be reconciled with God and with one another.

And that would be the real reason why we celebrate the Pentecost.