Day of Pentecost

Year C

May 15, 2016

The Reverend Amelie Wilmer Minor

*Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, `Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.*

*"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."*

*["I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."] John 14:8-17 (25-27)*

*\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*

By now, you all know that Pentecost is the day we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church, our birthday!  That's why we wear red, the color of the Holy Spirit, and we get to hear our gospel spoken in different languages.  Even Japanese!

We have two New Testament readings for today that focus on this gift of the Holy Spirit; one from Acts and the other from the Gospel of John.  Same Holy Spirit, but two very different scenes.

The first, our reading from Acts, is the more familiar description of what we know as Pentecost, a Greek word that means 50th day.   50 days after the resurrection, a “rush of violent wind” and “tongues of fire” come upon the disciples assembled in that ‘upper room.’ This enables them to speak in other languages so that all who were in town for the festival of weeks - the Jewish Pentecost which took place 50 days after Passover - could understand them.  People from Mesopotamia heard Mesopotamian, those from Egypt heard Egyptian, and so forth, all from the mouths of those Galileans....

In this story, the gift of the Holy Spirit is that it brings together people who are separated by the barrier of language – something that has been a part of the human condition since the Tower of Babel - at least according to Genesis.  Now, by the fiery power of the Holy Spirit, God provides a way for people to communicate once again, so that those who knew Jesus could tell the rest of the world the good news of the risen Christ and they could be in community with each other.

Then, our second reading from the Gospel of John tells a different story altogether, or so it seems. This version is less familiar, and it’s the one that got my attention this week. It is taken from the same section of John that we have been hearing for much of this Easter season, Jesus’ “Farewell discourse” to his disciples, the night before he is taken away. Here, he is reassuring them, at a time of great sadness and uncertainty, that he will be sending them the Holy Spirit as their Advocate later on.

Yet, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus himself will give this gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples assembled in that upper room just a few nights later, by breathing on them, an event that occurs on the evening of Easter Day. There will be no fifty day gap between the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Instead of a large, open gathering as in Acts, in John’s version, the group that is first promised and then later receives the Spirit is small, the closest followers of Jesus, huddled in a room behind a locked door fearing for their lives.

The associations, the “feel” of these two readings is completely different. In Acts we associate the coming of the Spirit with tongues of fire, a rushing wind, loud oratory about the glory of the risen Christ. In John, there is this sense of quiet, fear, anxiety when Jesus says to his disciples, “My peace I leave with you; peace I give to you. This is a group of people who need to have their fears eased, their anxiety calmed.

Peace. I can feel my whole body almost sigh with relief and expectation when I hear Jesus say that word. But why? How do we understand this peace? What do we imagine Jesus means?

So often, we think of peace as simply the ceasing of conflict. And clearly and end to violence and war is a good thing. Many of us have prayed for peace in the Middle East, peace in our inner cities, perhaps even peace in our home. But I think the peace Jesus offers through the Holy Spirit is more than just the absence of something negative. It has its own presence, its own gravity.

When we talk about feeling “at peace,” for instance, we are describing more than an absence of conflict but rather a sense of wholeness, even rightness, in one’s very being. It’s also a sense of harmony with the people and things around us – what is called in Hebrew “shalom” - an experience of contentment and fulfillment, that in this moment you are basking in God’s pleasure. This is the “spirit” of peace.

And it can come even amid hardship, struggle, conflict, and disruption.

Think, again, of the timing of Jesus’ promise of peace: it is the night of his betrayal, the evening he will be handed over to those who hate him and who will take him away to be executed. And yet in that moment, he not only senses peace but gives it to others.

This peace is a gift of the Holy Spirit. In my own life, it is something I sense most deeply when I am able to let go, when I hand over to God my control of the things I’m worrying about or feel pressure to fix. And this doesn’t mean surrendering responsibility, but instead recognizing there are limits to what I can affect or achieve on my own, and sensing those limits, placing myself, my loved ones, my desires, and my future, in God’s hands.

Nine times out of ten, God’s response, or what I perceive to be God’s response, is the gift of peace, the spirit of peace. A peace that allows me, at least for a while, to lift my gaze from my own troubles and see the people and the world around me as God sees them, as blessings, worthy of my love and attention.

Which brings me to what else Jesus has to say about the peace of the Holy Spirit, which is: “I do not give to you as the world gives.” Of course, you might be wondering what it is that the world does give*,* especially these days, when for the most part, the World tells us that we have to *earn* anything which is worthwhile. You need to look out for yourself. There’s simply not enough to go around, so you’ve got to be in constant competition with everyone else for scarce resources. (And if you’re not sure that this is message of the world, just listen to the political campaigns!)

Peace, from this perspective, is at best a break, a reprieve, a brief lull in the fray of everyday life and the constant need to compete, to secure, to hoard, and protect.

But Jesus gives differently than the world. He gives freely, with no expectation of return, only the hope that, transformed by the Spirit of peace, we might pass it on, giving others the gift we have received.

Each week, after we say our prayers and confession, we “pass the peace.” In some churches, this amounts to little more than a perfunctory “good morning,” but here, it is genuinely heartfelt; if we had it our way, it would go on for 15 minutes! But I wonder - how often do we really sense the depth of God’s gift of peace? How much do we actually feel caught up and embraced by the Spirit of peace, and the promise that God loves us, [is always working for our good and the good of our neighbor], and will hold onto us through all that may come? And then, how often do we really sense the Spirit moving us, not only to experience this peace but to share it with others?

So many of us, I believe, crave, long for this kind of peace. And yet, so much of the time, when we seek it out, we find it to be illusive. What “the world” offers as peace – wealth, achievements, new gadgets, technology, leaves us craving even more.

If I’ve learned anything over these years in my ministry, it is that the Peace of God, the Spirit of peace that we all ultimately crave, isn’t something you can pursue or grasp but only receive. That is, only as we release our grip on the many things we are trying to hold onto do we possess the open hands that can receive God’s gift of peace. Even in those moments when we are convinced that it is all up to us, and perhaps especially so, God is right there, offering the spirit of peace, a gift the world cannot give.

With that in mind, I invite us all, just for a moment, to open our hands, to just receive and rest in God’s pleasure, in the confidence that God loves us and wants to use us for good. And that through the power and peace of the Holy Spirit, God will bless those around us with that same gift.

“My peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.” Come, Holy spirit, Come.

Amen