

We continue today in Paul's letter to the followers of Jesus in Rome, where Paul talks a lot about the work of the Holy Spirit. For example, throughout Romans, the Greek word for Spirit, "pneuma," appears 34 times, and 20 of those 34 times are found in chapter 8. It is the Spirit, the very breath of God, who molds our lives into the shape of Christ's life. Today is Pentecost- this word comes from a Greek word meaning fiftieth. In this case the 50th day after Easter and thus, the last day of the Easter season. On Pentecost the Holy Spirit is center stage, rushing as a wind through the early church and inflaming the hearts of Jesus' believers. Parishioner Owen Robertson approached me a few weeks ago and asked if he could create this art piece for Pentecost. Of course I was thrilled! However, I was planning on skipping the Acts story and just preaching on Romans. Nevertheless, God's Spirit was on the move, and I pivoted. Thank you, again, Owen for sharing your gifts and perspective with us. In this work of art, Owen captures eleven diverse members of the Adult Bible Study speaking the word "flame" with tongues of fire and in different languages. Can you imagine? Talk about confusion? How strange! No wonder people asked what this meant while others thought they had gotten into the wine- big time! It's hard for us today to really comprehend the awe of Pentecost, isn't it? Some of us just say, "Oh, it's the birthday of the church," and it is, but it's also so much more- mysterious and complicated and beautiful and strange. "Pentecost is not just about a babble in the midst of confusion. Pentecost is about a liberated future that God has promised and that God will give. The same God who causes strangeness in the past is the God who gives newness in the future" (Walter Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text*). Pentecost is the big bang event

that sets the other events of the Book of Acts into motion as well as our lives in the church today. By any stretch of the imagination, the story of Pentecost is a fabulous story, full of riveting details. Tongues of fire. Rushing winds. Accusations of drunkenness. Mass baptism” (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net).

“Ordinarily when things seem strange, we gather around the Gospel that is familiar and reliable. When things seem too new and threatening, we appeal to God who is old and established. Ordinarily...except that Pentecost is not an ordinary time. The difference IS that it is God’s own Spirit that causes the strangeness. It is God’s Holy Spirit who is new among us. It is the Spirit of Jesus among us who changes everything. We speak this day of the Spirit, the church’s feeble attempt to talk about the dangerous energy and presence of Jesus who is still alive in the world today. Jesus promised he would send an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to be the presence of the risen Christ throughout the world working to bring about the fullness of God’s reign. And...won’t God do it?! God most certainly does! Before we listen to God’s word for us this day both in Acts and in Romans, let us first pray.

PRAY. READ.

I frequently get asked to explain how Triune works or what is Triune Mercy Center like? Just last week, I gave five tours of this church and told some stories of what God is up to here. At Triune, we are the church of Jesus Christ at least six- if not seven days of the week. Pat Parker, the Associate Director of the Mercy Center, likes to say that God’s Spirit lives here, when

trying to answer the question why things happen here the way they do. For example, someone utters that we need peanut butter and peanut butter just shows up. We need the downstairs bathrooms renovated and a family foundation offers to pay for it. We have a generous giver who provides beautiful flowers every Sunday that then get put into vases by a wonderful parishioner who volunteers on Mondays and placed on the tables in the Dining Hall for all to enjoy. We're doing justice and advocating for affordable housing, mental health and many other important matters, and God keeps showing up and showing out. Pat also likes to say that "spiritual magic lives here." While that's not the language I would use, I agree with her 100%! God's Spirit is on the loose all around us! I believe it because I witness the Spirit at work. There are moments that are strange and unexplainable. Goosebumps moments. Moments when the wind blowing through here knocks me down and brings tears to my eyes. Yet, there are some of us who may still inwardly await the work of God's Spirit among us as we may feel separated from God and one another- ashamed and weighed down- eyes closed to the power of the Spirit at work in and through us, seduced by the lies of our culture.

Notice that Paul says that God's Spirit witnesses **with** our spirit. The emphasis is on the relationship between God and God's people. And not just God's people but all of creation. Yes, God is bringing all of creation into salvation. "The Spirit crucifies us to the flesh and raises us to new life in which 'love is lord of all.' This was strange and seemingly impossible in first century Rome, and it remains so today, but it is the impossible dream of

our faith” (Wendy Farley, *Connections*). God’s Spirit is intimately involved with each of us. The Holy Spirit reminds us who we are when we’re fearful: when we’re suffering: when we think we’re ‘not enough.’ God’s Spirit reminds us that God made us in God’s image. We’re beloved children of God and there’s nothing we can do about it! “By Roman law, adopted children, unlike slaves, were full heirs of their father’s estate. The inheritance Paul refers to is the glory, or eternal life in God’s presence, that God intended for humanity and that Christ has already received” (*CEB Study Bible*). As children of God we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit inspires us to pray to God, just as Jesus did.

One theologian (Karl Barth) calls this passage “the song of the redeemed.” Because Paul’s claims are big and bold. He says that everything will be redeemed- that is, everything that fell with Adam’s fall will be set free by Christ’s redeeming work. “Children and heirs of God. That, incredibly, is what we are. There never was and never will be another legacy like this one. Moths and rust do not corrupt it, thieves do not break through and steal. It cannot be lost in the stock market or burned in the night or canceled out by inflation. This legacy gives us hope when all else fails. It guarantees us a future when we cannot imagine how there can be anything left in life for us. Paul says the Holy Spirit is the guarantor of our inheritance. When a Christian cries out Father/Mother/Beloved, however inarticulate the prayer, however sinful the petitioner, however desperate the cry, it is the Spirit speaking for them, guaranteeing that their hope is not in vain, that God hears them, that God has adopted them as God’s heir,

that God has prepared an inheritance for them that nothing can destroy” (Fleming Rutledge, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*). Hope, Paul says, is rooted in an ability to see what one does not yet see. Hope is anticipating an inheritance that has not yet been received. Yet, how do we understand that hope?

A parishioner had been in prison for over 20 years and when he was released, he had missed a lot, including the death of his mom, dad, and siblings- all from cancer. This man had every right to be in the depths of despair and he was to an extent- trapped by addiction and sorrow. Pastor Amanda met with him on several occasions and together they made rocks, each with his family members’ names on them. And together they placed them in our Saints’ Garden in the courtyard. As this parishioner told me of his sadness and grief, I felt the Spirit’s presence among us- all of creation- including the courtyard. This parishioner, who is working recovery, chooses to live in hope because he knows that he is a child of God and no one can destroy that. No one. It is incorruptible. “If this seems like a tall order, remember that Paul is inviting us into a completely different universe from the one we know” (Farley). One where love is the lord of our lives.

Where have you experienced the work of the Holy Spirit in your life? You know those things that happen that you know aren’t you or times when you experience works of love, peace, and justice. You know those times “whenever two plus two does not equal four but five- whenever you find yourself speaking with eloquence you know you do not have, or offering

forgiveness or time you had not meant to offer- whenever you find yourself taking risks you thought you did not have the courage to take or reaching out to someone you had intended to walk away from. Times when it is as if a fresh wind blows through the room and clears everyone's heads. These times- you can be almost certain are made possible by the Holy Spirit" (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*). But God's Spirit doesn't just show up in the good times. God's Spirit challenges, stirs up, and comforts in the midst of much suffering- with sighs- with groans too deep for words. God's Spirit is always with us, especially in a community of faith.

The other day I was eavesdropping on a conversation at the grocery store. One woman was saying she hadn't been to church in a long while. The other in line with her said, "Well, you better go if you want to get close to God." Friends, "getting close to God" is not really the purpose of coming to church. I'm honored to be around people who are more interested in being the church than having church. "We come together on the Lord's Day to be the people of God, to enact strategies of hope, to bear witness together that 'the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.' The church is you and me, not as isolated individuals, but all of us together, representing God's suffering creation with all its disappointment and cruelty and pain, but, at the same time, bearing a message of hope. To be the church means to be a community of solidarity with the whole creation, waiting with hope for the glorious redemption that God brings. We don't see it yet; it is out in front of us. That is why we have hope. Yes, even such as we are, we are being

remade, by faith and patience, in the image of God's own Son, Jesus Christ" (Fleming Rutledge, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*).

Paul never calls the Christian community to look away from this troubled world to a blissful future. No. Paul boldly states that the entire creation- the whole created order- all of nature and the universe- is 'standing on tip toe'- to see what God will do as God fulfills God's promise (Rutledge). And that- by Paul's definition- is called hope. "What a stunning vocation for the church, to stand free and hope-filled in a world gone fearful...and to think, imagine, dream, vision a future that God will yet enact" (Brueggemann).
Happy Birthday, church! Come, Holy Spirit, come! Amen.