

In the name of the God-Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen

My favorite book as a child was The Boy's King Arthur, and I can still see those wonderful N.C. Wyeth illustrations. The book begins by telling us that "On the day of Pentecost, when Uther Pendragon was King of Cornwall." The reference to Pentecost is of course to this day, but we didn't call it Pentecost then, 60 years ago, for we were decided modernists and called it Whitsunday. Why, I have no idea. I looked it up last week in the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church and still have no idea. Happily, with the 1979 prayer book we have returned to the New Testament name Pentecost, the fifteenth day, after Easter.

As this lesson from Acts indicates, the Holy Spirit came like the rush of a violent wind and filled both the house the disciples were in and the disciples themselves. Jesus had told them the Spirit, the Counselor was coming, and the Spirit did indeed arrive big time. But remember the lesson from Numbers, written down at least 2000 years before Luke wrote Acts. The Holy Spirit is a big player in that story. And by the way, aren't you glad it's the Holy Spirit now rather than the Holy Ghost? As a child I always thought of Casper the Friendly Ghost. You may know that Washington Duke, who founded the American Tobacco Company and gave his name to Duke University, said there were three things in life he didn't understand:

the Holy Ghost, electricity, and his son Buck.

It has been a long time since anyone saw Jesus in the flesh, walking around, talking with his friends. The Holy Spirit though we encounter daily. The examples are endless, and for every one I suggest, you can likely add twenty more from your own experience. Dorothy Day in her wonderful book The Long Loneliness, wrote that “It is not easy to be joyful, to keep in mind the duty of delight.” The duty of delight, in God’s world and God’s creation, brought home to us in heart, in mind and soul by the Holy Spirit.

When we were baptized, we were sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever. At confirmation the bishop asks that we be strengthened with God’s Holy Spirit and that we may daily increase in God’s Holy Spirit. At the great family meal together, we offer the bread and wine and ask that they be sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and that we too be sanctified by the Holy Spirit, that we may faithfully receive the Holy Sacrament. The blessing of a marriage is invoked by the power of the Holy Spirit. Absolution after confession is granted by the grace of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit of course is all over the ordination liturgy. Give your Holy Spirit to Jan. Fill her with grace and power, and make her a deacon in your Church. Give your Holy Spirit to Anne. Fill her with your grace and power, and make her a priest in your church. And, make Bob a bishop in

your Church. Pour out upon him the power of your princely Spirit. And, for all three orders of the ordained ministry of the Church, the ninth century Pentecostal hymn Veni Creator Spiritus is sung, Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire. In the rite of healing and the laying on of hands, offered here at each service, we anoint with oil and say that “As you are outwardly anointed with holy oil, so may our heavenly Father grant you the inward anointing of the Holy Spirit.” And finally, at death, we say:

Depart, O Christian soul, out of this world;

In the name of God the Father Almighty who created you;

In the Name of Jesus Christ who redeemed you;

In the Name of the Holy Spirit who sanctifies you.

I take great comfort in knowing that that commendation will be said at my death, as I have said it at the death of others, though I hope it's a good way off just yet. I know the Holy Spirit surrounds me, though at times I do my best to ignore it, but it still helps to be reminded of it, reassured of it.

You still have doubts about the Holy Spirit? I remember feeling embarrassed that my father always gave me a hug and a kiss, long after I was grown. When I had children of my own, suddenly I understood. I can feel that hug and hear his voice today, 31 years after he died. And that

feeling doesn't come from any tactile sensation, no hands on my shoulder, and yet it's there, invisible as a gentle breeze but no less real. In Hebrew the word for spirit is the same as that for wind, that gentle breeze Elijah felt at the mouth of the cave, just before he heard the still small voice of God. The Holy Spirit? What else? I can still smell the dusting powder my grandmother wore, but my sense of smell isn't that good, so it must be something else. Remember the throes of first love, the joy of holding a new baby brother or sister, the incomparable joy of beholding and holding your own child, to look upon her face and understand our place among the unknown dead in churchyards lying, to see as the poet Alice Duer Miller tells us, the reason why we lived and why we die, even to find a certain grace in dying. To know the reason why buds below and blossoms die, why beauty fades and genius is undone, and how unjustified is any human pride in all creation-save in that common one.

Remember the worst most painful argument you ever had with a loved one, and how awful it was? Remember too the hard work and grace that went into forgiveness and being forgiven? Remember the terrible weight you felt lifted from your shoulder? What lifted it? What else?

Major surgery is an experience many of us have had. Call it superstition if you like but I remember insisting in the OR that they undo

the strap holding my right arm down so I could cross myself. One of you mentioned to me recently the incomparable sense of relief felt at receiving the sacraments in the hospital. I've been there too, on both sides, and it is hard to understand without factoring in the Holy Spirit.

A year ago I was at Robben Island, in the Southern Ocean off Cape Town, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years for his opposition to apartheid rule in South Africa. From the moment of his release he spoke of only healing and reconciliation, never of recrimination, and together with our own bishop Desmond Tutu he established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for the healing of that lovely and great country. You ask me, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu are no less than the Holy Spirit at work or, put another way, Christ's hands and feet today, on this earth. I remember also being in Soweto Township outside Johannesburg and walking through the poor neighborhood where those two Nobel Peace Prize winners grew up, three blocks apart. Can any good come from Nazareth, or Soweto? It was in that poor township setting that Desmond Tutu as a young boy encountered Trevor Huddleston, then a monk and a priest and later exiled from apartheid South Africa to become a bishop in the Church of England. Trevor Huddleston tipped his hat to Desmond Tutu's mother and called her Mrs. Tutu, unusual in the South Africa of that day, so unusual

that the young boy noticed it and decided to follow in Huddleston's path and become a priest. And it was Trevor Huddleston who taught him that the work or liturgy of being Christ to each other may begin at the altar here at St. Luke's or the cathedral in Cape Town, but it continues out there, where the real work lies, with the homeless, the poor, the addicted, the angry, the unloved unlovables, the sick, the dying, and the incarcerated, all those marginalized folks who were always at the center of Jesus' love and concern.

Joel, preaching, and prophesying 2400 years ago, wrote:

I will pour out my Spirit on  
all people. Your sons and daughters  
will prophesy, your old men will  
dream dreams, your young men will  
see visions.

And it is not only old men who dream dreams. You may have seen the picture of me and 200,000 other of his close friends by the reflecting pool in front of the Lincoln Memorial when Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of his great dream for all of us. And as was said so many times by Bob Kennedy, dead now 40 years and I miss him yet, "Some men see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and say why not." You will

not persuade me the Holy Spirit of God is absent from that sentiment, nor from our Christ-like task, to tame the savagery of man and make gentle the life of this world.

I think too of the very real presence of the Holy Spirit in my life one night as I wondered if I was about to die. A young man perhaps more scared than I was held a gun on me, a cheap Saturday night special. I had offered him my car, but it was an old Plymouth, nor would he take my Duke football tickets, and I certainly did not offer my autographed baseballs. Eventually he asked me to kneel down on the floor and with my back to him. I could think of no benign reason for that, so I declined and instead, ever so slowly, I made the sign of the cross. My young guest asked what that was, and after I explained it, he apologized and left. We were not alone in that room that night.

And all of us, all the time, every day of our lives have the love, support, and guidance of the Holy Spirit. God never told us he would kiss it and make it well. Grandparents do that. The divine promise was that we would not be left alone, comfortless. And that promise has been kept and will be kept, for all time to come. This is the gift of the Holy Spirit we celebrate today on this feast of Pentecost.

Now if I may digress a moment, Senator Ervin liked to tell the story of a drunk who wandered into Grace Church, Morganton, in the mountains where I grew up. The priest, my great uncle Bill Stoney, had just said “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.” The drunk fellow immediately replied “What could be fairer than that?” Indeed. Well the good Lord almost three years ago brought Sarah Kerr into our lives here, and it hasn’t been the same since. Anne and I have wished we could clone her. Today is her last Sunday with us, her parents are here from Maine, and Sarah is graduating today from the Divinity School. But now Sarah is leaving us. She and Bishop Curry and the Archbishop of Canterbury and a bunch of other interesting folks will be at the Lambeth Conference this summer, but we hope Sarah will return to us. I look forward to her ordination before long, but in the meanwhile we will all miss her dreadfully. Sarah dear, we love you.

Amen.

St. Luke’s

11 May 2008

