

Acts 2:1-21
Psalm 104:25-35,37b
1 Corinthians 12:36-13
JOHN 20:19-23

The Holy Spirit comes to *us*

“Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon these your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised them to the new life of grace. Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all God’s works.” Amen. [*The Book of Common Prayer, p. 308*]

Were you perplexed that I preceded today’s sermon by that prayer? That is the prayer (page 308 in The BCP) which is said after a baptism or baptisms – the thanksgiving for the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit which are given at baptism. Well, as you have noticed, we don’t have any baptisms today. What we do have, however, is a gathering of a good many people who have already been baptized. If you have been baptized, that prayer of thanksgiving applies to *you* for the seven spiritual gifts which you have received, gifts which will never wear out, never shrink in the wash, never become obsolete with advances in technology, never become outmoded as you move through different stages in your life, and never get lost if you move – you get the picture.

Not only that, those gifts along with membership in the Body of Christ which is the whole Christian Church, are the only gifts you have received or could ever receive which you could use for *longer than your lifetime*.

Want me to read the list again?

Wait a minute – isn’t today the day we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to the apostles, long ago and comfortably far away from us? Yes. We’re doing that too. *And it is because of that historical event that we ourselves have unlimited spiritual potential today!*

Did anyone else ever tell you that you had truly “unlimited potential” at something: your Spanish teacher or Chemistry teacher in High School? Your athletic coach? Your first boss at work? Your spouse, partner or best friend? Yourself? No?

God tells you that you have unlimited spiritual potential.

See, there’s another phrase in the baptismal service we sometimes zoom past – when godparents of infants are asked, “Will you by your prayers and witness help this child grow up into *the full stature of Christ?*”

Wow.

Now, the babies don’t understand it when that promise is made on their behalf. But we can, if not fully understand it, at least hear it. Godparents would not be asked to take such a mind-blowing vow if it weren’t possible – if, *with God’s help*, it weren’t

possible “to grow up into the full stature of Christ.” That doesn’t mean we can become divine – no Mormon heresies, please – but it means we can, potentially, experience the unlimited spiritual potential open to any human being who turns her or his allegiance to God, God’s Kingdom, God’s plan. Forever.

This gift never needs ironing. You will never outlive its abundance. No restrictions on this due to your pre-existing conditions.

This opportunity for the **abundant life** is possible because of the historical event we celebrate today: Pentecost. Seven weeks after Jesus’ resurrection and ten days after his ascension into heaven, a bunch of previously clueless, self-centered, scared, depressed followers of Jesus became superbly coachable, boundlessly generous with their time, talents and treasure, courageous, and filled with joy.

And you thought the *resurrection* was a miracle!

Peter – the same guy who denied Christ three times, the same guy who went back to fishing even after he saw Jesus rise from the dead because that’s the only thing he thought he knew how to do, suddenly stands up in downtown Jerusalem and proclaims that the miraculous opening up of the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ to those who spoke other languages was a fulfillment of ancient prophecy. Moreover, he goes on to proclaim Jesus as raised from the dead, victorious over sin and death – in public, perhaps in front of some of the same Roman soldiers and temple police who had so intimidated him on Good Friday. *Peter the chicken-hearted becomes St. Peter the lion-hearted.*

And we thought the resurrection was a miracle.

On the day before Pentecost, all the members of the community of believers in Jesus in the whole world were gathered together. They numbered 120 in all. They would have easily fit in this sanctuary, with room to spare.

On the day of Pentecost, **three thousand** people’s hearts and minds were transformed by Peter’s message and were baptized.

And we thought the resurrection was a miracle.

The 120 followers were all Palestinian Jews as far as we know, many of them from country towns. They were *not* a cosmopolitan bunch with lots of global connections. All spoke Aramaic, most probably knew some biblical Hebrew, and there were some (like the tax collector, Matthew) who could have gotten along in another language or two.

But the languages of the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Cappadocians, Asians, Phrygians, Pamphylia, Egyptians, Libyans, Romans, Cretans and Arabs – uh, no. Galilean fisherman didn’t get taught all that in school. (Think what the property taxes would have had to be. It’s a lot cheaper to have the Spirit teach.)

And we thought the resurrection was a miracle? How about Pentecost? Briefly, they were able to talk about Jesus to others *in their own languages, which opened a door which has never been shut.*

Ever since then, Christians have sought to teach others about Jesus in the languages of the others. Muslims need to learn Arabic. Many Jews learn at least some Hebrew. Christians have a different approach: we do home delivery. Starting from the Day of Pentecost, believers in Jesus have reached out to others in the language of the others. The New Testament itself was written in Greek, which was the most commonly spoken language in the eastern Mediterranean in the first century. The number of the original inner circle of believers in Jesus who spoke Greek as their first language? Zero. “Speak to the peoples in their own languages,” said the Holy Spirit.” The disciples – all of them, not just “the eleven”, said, “yes, sir.”

We this morning heard this reading initially in English – a language which did not even *exist* when the first Pentecost occurred. [At 10:30, we also heard the first half of the first reading in French, Ga, German, Igbo, Kikamba, Malagasy, Spanish and Swahili.] The Holy Spirit says to Christians all over the world, “Speak to people in the language they can understand.” “Yes, sir,” say we. And speak about “God’s deeds of power,” as reported by the surprised listeners on that first Pentecost.

Now, my word for today is this; **“God’s deeds of power” have not stopped.** That’s the first point. The second is this: **Some of God’s deeds of power can flow through us.** Each and all of us.

The biggest change in the Episcopal Church in my lifetime is – no, not women’s ordination, contemporary language worship or openness to extraordinary diversities of people, significant as those changes are. The answer to “What is the biggest change in the Episcopal Church in the last 56 years?” is found in The BCP, page 855 in the middle.

When I was a child, a “minister” was a person (always adult, always male, nearly always married and nearly always white) who had gone to seminary and who wore a clerical collar and who, by himself, was understood to “do the ministry” of his parish.

Now, the Catechism declares – Heh, let me pose the answer, “Jeopardy” style, and you all read aloud the question, page 855. “The ministers of the church are lay persons, bishops, priests and deacons.” [“Who are the ministers of the church?”] Now let’s try it the conventional way: “Who are the ministers of the church?” “The ministers of the church are lay persons, bishops, priests and deacons.”

Notice who comes first in that list?

So if someone asks me, “When did you enter the ministry?” My answer is “October 30, 1954,” because that’s the day I was *baptized*. When did *you* enter the ministry?

The Episcopal Church has taken a while to catch up with the reality of Pentecost and the fulfillment of the prophet Joel’s prophecy – that God would pour out God’s Spirit on all flesh. Actually, it’s still catching up. This is as big a revolution in thinking as the one of Copernicus and Galileo in astronomy or Darwin in biology, but it’s more profound because of **the ministry revolution’s** potential impact on our daily lives. I can go days without looking at stars (it’s hard to see many of them anyway in central New Jersey) or without pondering the wonders of evolution, but *if everything every Christian does can be ministry* – service to God and to others – that’s revolutionary every day.

Everything – including “church stuff” but mainly everything *outside* a church. If we really, really love God and our neighbors, how do we behave when we’re outside of these four walls? Imagine the impact we’re having now – and could have! All that is **ministry!**

How do we live this out? Well, right after this sermon we will have the Renewal of Baptismal Vows, which spells out the job description of being a Christian: what we believe (the answers to the first three questions), and how we’re going to behave because of what we believe. How we commit ourselves to behave, with God’s help.

Without God’s help, forget it. We’re toast. But God does help us. And God has given us gifts, wonderful gifts which each of us can express in wonderful ways which are uniquely our own. So let **us** conclude this sermon by together saying the prayer of thanksgiving for the spiritual gifts God has given us at baptism, page 308, and then resolve to go out and use these wonderful gifts every day. Please stand. [Repeat prayer, as at the beginning.]

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