

Pentecost (Year A)  
June 4, 2017  
The Apostles Graduation Day

Writing in Day by Day, layperson Ann Rose says,

*'the language of awe, like the language of love and grief, is the language of poetry. We search for rational words to express our deepest realities – and find they're just not adequate. We turn to images and metaphors.'*

The language of awe. Our Easter season is awe-filled: Jesus is crucified, rises from the tomb and appears again on earth; the Ascension comes, Jesus departs. Pentecost comes, the Spirit descends. In a spectacular act of the Spirit, the power of understanding spreads among the crowds. The (capital C) Church moves forward to conquer the world.

Some small skeptical part of me whispers, 'too Hollywood', and I am tempted to say, 'that was really terrific, God, but what have you done lately?' And then, in the same moment, I recognize the inadequacy of words to express the realities of that first Eastertide experience. How does the deep sacredness of those times transcend the passage of two thousand years, so that we, too, can touch and treasure the awe of God?

How do we relate Pentecost to our own tumultuous, but nevertheless more ordinary, experiences?

Perhaps because it is the season, high school and college graduations come to mind. Four years of preparation and study, and, boom – you're pronounced ready to go. Our oldest grandson Aidan just graduated from Sewanee, in Tennessee. A while back, he said to me that he only had until the end of May to 'grow up' – he would have to get his own insurance, find his own apartment, get a job – and while the prospect was daunting, rather than worrying about the future he planned to direct his focus to passing his exams,. And of course, he did, graduating with great fanfare, speech making, family celebrations, and so forth. Then drove cross-country to the family home in Seattle, where he is now, trying to formulate a viable plan for the rest of his life.

Catapulted forward after four years of college, into the unknown future. Clutching his diploma in physics, with two minors, music and history. Filled with knowledge, a rocket ready to be launched.

The disciples knew, in advance, that their teacher would be leaving them. Jesus warned them – more than once– that he would be killed in Jerusalem – and they set that aside, except for some discussions about who was the greatest among them. When Jesus' death seemed near and inevitable, one of them – Judas -- found a way to make few pieces of gold off his betrayal. Peter failed his final examinations, denying Jesus three times after the crucifixion.

What a mess. The disciples locked themselves away. They did not immediately credit Mary's

report that Jesus had risen from the tomb. They were fearful of the world around them, of the violence unleashed against the followers of Jesus. There were confrontations– and probably recriminations – among them.

After three years of study and learning together, they didn't know how to leave that locked room. The teacher was gone. The teaching was there and waiting to be shared, to be used, for the glory of God. They were ready, but needed a spark to get them going.

Then, the risen Jesus – the reality, the epitome of grace -- came before them and said,

*“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’ John 20:20-23*

There were no sweeping sound effects, it was a quiet and intimate moment. God's Spirit made it possible for their fears and their differences to be collected, re-directed toward the task and quest ahead. “So I send you.”

In the Book of Acts, Luke tells us that fifty days after that first Easter evening, the disciples came together again in that upstairs room. On that day, great sound and wind filled the entire house; divided tongues of fire touched those who gathered there. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and given the gift to speak in other languages. The sound– that great cacophony of wind and voices – attracted curious crowds.

It was the Jewish celebration of Weeks or Pentecost (the fiftieth day after the Passover). It was the Shavuot, the day when ancient Israel celebrated the giving of the law to Moses at Sinai. (Ex. 34:22, Deut. 16:10) In that year of Christ's crucifixion, the day of Jewish Pentecost was also the fiftieth day after the Easter resurrection.

For Christians, that day is marked by the Holy Spirit forever. It was the apostles' graduation day, and the birthday of the Church.

Peter gave the baccalaureate address, his first recorded public sermon. He proclaimed the Easter kerygma - Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

*Let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah.... Acts 2:36.*

The world right now is very much like the world Jesus walked around in. Unrest, anxiety, factionalism, leaks, betrayals and arguments even among the inner leadership circles.

In John 17, Jesus implores God to send the Spirit to bring unity, asserting that his followers are ready to be one, that they all understand his teachings. We hear that the disciples were miraculously of one mind, and that to follow Jesus is to be of one mind. But what does that

mean?

Conventional theology takes these assurances of unity of understanding literally – that illusion of unity of thought has led the Church to struggle with statements of dogma, and accusations of heresy. When we look more closely, we can see conflict, and that ‘being of one mind’ should be interpreted differently. It is not about right belief, but about common mission and community.

Much of the time, Jesus’ followers did not understand him. John 16:18 reads, *They said, What does he mean by this ‘a little while’? We do not know what he is talking about.* Jesus offered explanations of his own parables – and even these are debated. He expressed frustration with Peter, calling him Satan at one point. After Easter, Thomas cried out that the disciples certainly did *not* know the way to the kingdom of heaven.

My point is this. Pentecost took place in a world of divided opinions and endless arguments, just like the world we are in. But, the disciples shared a sense of common mission, they mutually supported each other, and they held a communal attitude of goodwill sparked by letting go of their fears. That spark was the assurance of the Spirit, that giving of Christ’s Peace on Easter evening; that spark was the great flame of Pentecost which made their message of God’s love understandable in any language.

Jesus’ Peace did not produce unity of thought; each disciple undoubtedly had his own experience of Jesus’ presence. Still they recognized in each other the fundamental truth that God loves each one, despite differences in their hopes, expectations, or the way they see the world. The Spirit gave them courage to step outside their fears because they were a part of something bigger, profound, a mystery without explanation but palpable nevertheless.

In a profile appearing in last week’s *New Yorker* magazine, Defense Secretary James Mattis was asked what worried him most about his new position. The interviewer writes, ‘I expected him to say ISIS or Russia or the defense budget.’ Mattis’s response was this:

*The lack of a fundamental friendliness. It seems like an awful lot of people in America and around the world feel spiritually and personally alienated, whether it be from organized religion or from local community school districts or from their governments.*

*...If you lose any sense of being part of something bigger, then why should you care about your fellow man?*

The New Yorker, May 29, 2017

Pentecost arrives today into this conflicted, afflicted world. In a world that sometimes feels like it is spinning out of control, it is hard to remember the deep promises of God.

To believe in God, one must first believe in life, in the essential truth of goodness among us.

We cannot share love and faith if we ourselves are loveless, faithless.

The Peace of Christ will not bring the babble of opinions to a halt. Nor produce unity of thought. Pentecost offers us a powerful combination of God's peace, God's presence, and God at work through us.

When leading communal prayer we begin, 'the Lord be with you.' And those assembled respond, 'and also with you.'

Our liturgical invitation to pray is itself a prayer – the Peace of Christ, the Lord be with you. We treasure the response, 'and also with you.' We are here together, as one.

Sometimes, figuratively, we lock ourselves inside the church (little c), and our anxieties, disagreements, and anger freeze our attitudes and close our minds to possibilities. We forget to invite the world to pray with us, to bless the world around us.

We have the gift of the Spirit – let's share it!

What if we opened the doors of this church and invited the Spirit, the Peace of Christ, to grace all of Anacortes, that each and every one might experience the goodwill and love of God who loves us all? Would that make it possible, as in the Pentecost story, for us to understand each other, despite the differences in the way we see the world, our expectations of the future?

Let's do that. Our Pentecost prayer. Everybody turn around, face that baptismal font, and say together as loudly as you can: *The Lord be with you!*

Amen.

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