

The Day of Pentecost
May 23, 2021; Year B
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud
Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15; Psalm 104:25-35, 37

Jesus is going to send us a present. The Advocate, he says, so that we will not be alone. Today is the Feast of Pentecost, the third of the three big days on the Christian calendar, right after Christmas and Easter. Jesus was born on Christmas. Jesus rose again on Easter. And now, just ten days after we celebrate Jesus ascending into heaven and leaving us, we celebrate the day that Jesus gives us all a gift.

God goes by many names and is known by many qualities. And the fact that we followers of Jesus believe in a triune God, that is one God with three aspects: creator, redeemer, and sanctifier—well! Our belief in the Trinity gives us three times the names for God that we might otherwise have.

Today we remember the historical day that the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples, and they experienced her like a wind in a locked room, and flames of fire on their heads that did not burn or consume them. They experienced God as an Advocate who helped them understand one another in a multitude of languages. They knew her as a Comforter, who helped them out of that locked room and made them forget their fear. They knew her as Wisdom, who gave them words to speak to the crowd, and pull them into new life.

You have noticed, I am sure, that I am using the feminine pronoun for the Holy Spirit. I did not make that up just because I came of age in the 1970's and have signed my fair share of petitions for equal pay for equal work. Our Holy Scriptures are full of feminine references to the Holy Spirit of God. She is *Sophia*, Greek for Wisdom. Of course, just as Jesus was known to behave in ways that our culture would call feminine, Sophia gives power to our intellects, and in power, there is a bit of the cultural masculine to her too. So, let's not get hung up on the pronouns—he, she, or they, this is the day that Jesus promised us. The day when we humans received the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that we will not be alone.

It's a little odd, because the Spirit has been with us all along! The Holy Spirit was the wind that brooded over chaos in the beginning of the World. The prophet Isaiah proclaims the seven gifts of the Spirit of God some 700 years before Jesus' birth, and the writer of Revelation makes use of that imagery throughout his vision of the end times at the very end of our Bible.

So this special gift has been with us since forever; we have carried it on our breath since our very beginning. And more, because with God there is always more, the Holy Spirit may be *the* gift of God, but she brings with her countless gifts! Isaiah tells us there are seven: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, fear of the Lord, and delight in the fear of the Lord.

St. Paul gives us three different lists in three different letters—and there is only partial overlap! Sit in wonder for a moment; here are 21 gifts!¹:

¹ *Knowing and Living into Our Spiritual Gifts* by The Rev. W. Frank Allen, © 2017

| | | |
|----------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Romans 12:1-8</i> | <i>1 Corinthians 12:1-31</i> | <i>Ephesians 4:1-16</i> |
| Prophecy | Wisdom | Apostles |
| Ministry | Knowledge | Prophets |
| Teaching | Faith | Evangelists |
| Exhorting | Healing | Pastors |
| Giving | Miracles | Teachers |
| Leader | Prophecy | |
| Compassion | Discernment | |
| Tongues | Interpretation of Tongues | |

The First Letter of Peter, which was probably written by someone in Peter's church a couple of generations after Jesus, mentions just two gifts: speaking and serving. I might like this short list the best, but maybe that's just because "speaking and serving" is such a good description of how I hope I am among you.

Let me read those long lists again, and this time, feel if there is one, or two, or more that tug at your heart or tickle at your brain:

Wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, fear of the Lord, delight in the fear of the Lord.

| | | |
|------------|---------------------------|-------------|
| Prophecy | Wisdom | Apostles |
| Ministry | Knowledge | Prophets |
| Teaching | Faith | Evangelists |
| Exhorting | Healing | Pastors |
| Giving | Miracles | Teachers |
| Leader | Prophecy | |
| Compassion | Discernment | |
| Tongues | Interpretation of Tongues | |
| Speaking | Serving | |

The Holy Spirit of God, whom we celebrate this day, fills us with these gifts—and probably others as well. These are the things that we do well, and always in the service of others. These are the things that we do well, that bring joy to our hearts. These are the things that we do that make a difference to the world—not merely to our relationships, but to the natural world of which God has made us the stewards.

Now we might not use exactly these words, as we set about living life in God two or even three millennia after Isaiah, Paul, and Peter wrote their little lists. There have been revolutions in the arts, science, medicine, mechanics, industry; and electronics in the last 2800 years! How would we name the gifts today? Surely observation, interpretation of evidence, doctoring, and community organizing would be on the list of a modern prophet. And what about painting and dance and music in all its expressions? How do we use what we know and understand of God for the good of the world? Those things are the gifts of the Holy Spirit. What are God's gifts to you?

Sounds almost like heresy, doesn't it? Here I am suggesting that we can recognize the Holy Spirit and define her in our own words. How dare we presume to do that? We are the church of God, not as one of the great comics of my youth had it, "the church of what's happening now"! Can we really claim that the Holy Spirit is alive and active in our lives today?

Last week our in our Gospel lesson, we heard Jesus pray for his disciples on the night before his death. He asked God to “sanctify them in the truth.” Then he said, “your Word is truth.” And we remembered that John sets up this prayer at the very beginning of his Gospel when he describes Jesus as the Word. That means that Jesus is truth—the truth of God who sends us all gifts.

In today’s lesson, we hear Jesus speak to the disciples, and he promises them and us, that the Spirit will come to us and “guide us into all truth.” And so that long list of gifts, compiled by heroes of the faith: Isaiah, Paul, Peter—those gifts are what we need to be guided into truth—or you might say—to be guided into God. And if we believe, as he promised us, that Jesus lives, then surely the truth of God continues to live in us, and continues to shower us with gifts.

There are a couple of important things to notice about the way that Jesus sets us up to live without him here on earth. First of all, he promises that it is to our advantage that he goes away. That sounds ridiculous, but it is a pretty serious scene. I don’t think Jesus was joking around. He teaches the disciples to understand that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will be even more help in living a new life in God than following the example of Jesus. It’s as if he is saying that his flesh and blood life will distract us from the power and glory of God as we will find them in the gifts of the Spirit.

And then, we hear that Jesus’ name for the Holy Spirit is *Advocate*. An advocate is one that calls out. In this case, the Advocate calls goodness out of us, and then impels us to use it on behalf of the world. Remember that Peter describes the gifts as speaking and serving? The Advocate calls us to speak out for good and then use that good to serve God’s people. And it stands to reason that as our lives change and grow, the gifts of the Holy Spirit will change and grow with us.

Because this is the most important thing to notice—Jesus sends us an Advocate, not a general, or a president, or a parent. We are expected to do this work of living in God ourselves. That is why the gifts are so many and varied. Like the diversity of the human race, surely another of the gifts of God, the ways to live into God’s life are many and varied as well.

It does not make logical or linguistic sense that God would create a world full of Buddhists and Muslims and Jews and heathens and those with no faith at all and yes, Christians in all of our different ways of being—that God would create us and love each and every one of us with the same love. It doesn’t make sense—and yet, Jesus affirms that it is so. The greatest commandment, Jesus tells us, is to love God, and love one another as we love ourselves.

How do we love one another with the love of Jesus? Don’t worry! He tells us he will send us a gift. The Advocate is with us, has been with us all along. Listen to her voice in the wind and fire of Pentecost. And then, let’s get to work, using her gifts for the good of the world.