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Acts 2:1-21

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

Today on Pentecost we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. Of all the persons of the Trinity--the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit--the Spirit is often the hardest one for us to relate to. That may be because the Spirit seems to be without form or shape. When we think about God the Creator, rightly or wrongly, we tend to create an image in our mind. Even when we know that God is neither male nor female, we still may find ourselves picturing God as an old man with a beard. That could be because people of faith have tended to refer to God as "father" or to speak of God in mostly male terms. Of course, such images are limiting to God, who is bigger than our imaginations or our language can convey. But we grasp for ways to think about God and talk about God using images and terms we understand. I do encourage you to try something when you pray--to try to picture God as a mother, or imagine God as a female, and see how that might change the way you pray, the way you think or feel about God. It may open up new dimensions in your relationship with God.

And when it comes to Jesus, there too, we have developed an image in our minds. These images are often the result of European paintings and drawings of Jesus as a white blue-eyed Nordic looking figure which, when we think about it, are completely illogical to the geographic region of the world he was from. But thankfully there is an ever increasing body of artwork depicting Jesus not only as the Middle Eastern man he was, but also as an Asian man, an African man, a Native American man. These images of Jesus help us remember that God was born one of us--whoever we may be, whatever our skin color or our culture. So, with Jesus, our

imaginations have created a mental picture of what he might look like, and maybe that might be a bit like us.

But with the Holy Spirit, what is there to picture? What image comes to our minds? It's a bit more of a challenge and thus, maybe we have had a harder time relating to the Holy Spirit.

Scripture gives us some images of the Holy Spirit but they tend to be taken from the natural world rather than from human relationships. At Jesus' baptism, we see the Spirit descend on him "like a dove." And then in today's reading about the day of Pentecost, the Spirit appears as tongues of fire and like a mighty wind.

What we may learn from all this is that the Spirit is not so much someone we can picture as the Spirit is someone we can encounter. Notice how these biblical images of the dove, the fire, the wind reveal the Spirit as on the move, active, full of energy. The Spirit of God glides into our lives like a dove, calming us, comforting us in times of distress. The Spirit of God blows forcefully in our lives like the wind, moving us from our stale comfortable places into newness and freshness. The Spirit of God ignites our hearts and minds like flames of fire, motivating us, energizing us for action and for justice. These are just some of the gifts of the Spirit, gifts that come to us from a part of God that is more energy than image.

On the Day of Pentecost we can see how some of these gifts were bestowed upon the disciples--those terrified bunch of men and women who were traumatized after witnessing Jesus' execution. Huddled in an upstairs room, the followers of Jesus received the gift of God's Spirit. We can see how the Spirit gave them comfort, that God was indeed with them. And we can see how the Spirit gave them courage to come out of hiding. And we can see how the Spirit gave them energy and power to go forth to be Christ's disciples and become the Church. Comfort, courage, and energy were gifts given to those ancient disciples on that day of Pentecost and

remain gifts we modern disciples still need. Lord knows how a great many of our Christian churches could use a lot more energy and vitality.

But comfort, courage, and energy were not the primary gifts given by the Spirit to the disciples on that first Pentecost. The primary gift given to those men and women long ago, and still given to us all these centuries later, the primary gift of that first Pentecost was that we were given something to talk about. The primary gift of the Spirit on Pentecost is the gift of having something important to say.

Notice how much of the Pentecost story focuses on this topic of having something to say. At first, all the disciples, both men and women, start talking, but they are speaking in foreign languages they have never before spoken. You might imagine that it would be a wild and crazy cacophony of sound and confusion. But it wasn't because even while they were all speaking other languages, they were united in understanding. They all understood one another.

And then Peter stands up and the Spirit gives Peter something to say. Peter offers the first sermon of the Christian church. And he declares that what has happened is the fulfillment of the prophet Joel who spoke about how the Spirit would come upon God's people and would give them something to say. The prophet Joel long ago predicted that God's Spirit would be poured out upon the people and "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy," and that this same Spirit would even come upon male and female slaves and *they* would prophesy. In other words, people of all levels of social status, those of high rank and those of low rank, would all be blessed by God with something to say.

What did they have to say? Well, to prophesy in the Bible is to declare God's truth, to speak God's truth. And that is what those first disciples began to do after receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. They began to speak God's truth about Jesus, about God's love and mercy they had

known in Jesus. That is what Peter does in his sermon here on Pentecost. And that is what all the rest of the disciples would begin to do every day after that. They gathered in worship to declare God's love and mercy revealed in Jesus. And they shared the story of Jesus with others who hadn't yet heard about him. Some of them traveled great distances all throughout the region, even to Rome and beyond preaching and teaching about Jesus. They had been given something to say, something life changing, and they began to talk about it.

Others of Jesus' followers were also given the gift of something to say but would talk about it in different ways. Some of them went back to their homes and when their next door neighbor was ill, they divided their own meager food resources and took them over to their neighbor's family. And that is how they prophesied to Jesus' love and mercy. Or when members of their family cut them off and kicked them out for following Jesus, they strove to forgive them and love them nevertheless. And that is how they prophesied to God's truth of love and mercy. Or when they witnessed widows living in great poverty, these followers of the way of Jesus would organize a charitable campaign to raise money to help the widows survive. And that is how they prophesied to God's love and mercy in Jesus Christ. You see, the followers of the way of Jesus were all given by the Spirit the gift of prophesy, the gift of having something important to say. Some of them used words and some of them used actions. But all of them declared the good news of Jesus Christ.

And that same gift of the Spirit is still being poured out upon us here today. We have been given something important, something vital to say to a world in need and in pain. You know, sometimes you come to realize that most everyone around you is part of the walking wounded. We don't always know this because people are really good at covering up their wounds. But everyone is wounded in some way. Maybe they were abused as children. Maybe

their spouse just walked out on them. Maybe they just lost their job. Maybe they are bitter after a fight with their family. Maybe they aren't sure how they will pay their bills this month. Maybe their son just committed suicide. Or they are wounded and don't know it, and fill their lives with the pursuit of wealth, and material things, or turn to drugs and alcohol. There are wounded people all around our globe, in need of advocates, people who will proclaim God's justice on their behalf. There is great pain all around. And we are given the gift of the Spirit to speak to that pain and need. We are called to prophesy, in our words and through our actions, to the love and grace of Jesus Christ. There is not one single day of your life where what you have to "say" about Jesus' love and grace are not needed by the people you encounter--by your family, by your friends, by the stranger at the grocery store, or by people you may respond to on the other side of the world. What you have to say in word or in deed about Jesus' love and forgiveness and justice is needed every single day.

You see, whenever you reach out to help a person in need, that is the Spirit talking. And whenever you act generously in some way, that is the Spirit talking. And whenever you speak out against an injustice or a social problem, even knowing others will disagree or object, that is the Spirit talking. And whenever you work to forgive a deep hurt, that is the Spirit talking. Friends, we have been gifted with something so precious. We have been gifted with something important to say to the world about a God of love and grace. We have something important to say about life in the face of death, and hope in the face of despair. Jesus gave us that message. The Spirit gives us the ability to speak it and share it.

Many people refer to Pentecost as the birthday of the Christian church. But the church only comes alive when it tells about the good news of Jesus, when it lives out the good news of Jesus. The Christian church in general and this church specifically, are not organized for our

own benefit or purposes. God has given us a gift to be used on behalf of others--the gift of having something to say to a world of violence, pain, suffering, grief, struggle, and despair.

What does the Holy Spirit look like? The Holy Spirit could look like a dove or like fire or like the wind. Or the Spirit could look a lot like you and me as we bear witness through our words and through our deeds to God's love and grace and compassion and justice.