

Day of Pentecost, Year B
May 4, 2006
The Rev. Chip Larrimore

Today is Pentecost—the third great Christian Holy Day. On Christmas we celebrated the birth of Christ. On Easter we celebrated Jesus' resurrection. And today we remember the giving of God's Holy Spirit to the Church.

The events we just heard re-told in various languages as it was recorded in the Acts of the Apostles was from the Gospel of John. They took place on Easter evening, after the disciples had discovered that the tomb was empty and Jesus had appeared to Mary Magdalene. Jesus told her to tell the disciples that he had risen, which she did. But they couldn't understand. So on that first evening they were gathered in a house with the doors locked, because they were afraid—afraid of being killed, just as Jesus had been killed 3 days earlier. But suddenly Jesus came and stood among them and he said, "Peace be with you." Hm, "Peace be with you." In that context, what do you think Jesus was saying to the disciples when he said, "Peace be with you?" Yes, it was a traditional greeting. But it was not just, "Hi, how are you?" "Peace" is a **huge** biblical word. It refers to a "wholeness", a "completeness", a divine healing that envelopes people. The peace Jesus offers is a "peace that passes human understanding"; it is a "peace, not as the world gives"—not merely a lessening of conflict; not just a break in the fighting—but the great relief and security and hopefulness that comes from experiencing the love of God in your heart.

So, to this scared group of former followers, the risen Jesus begins by bringing the peace of God. And notice, he says it not once, but twice. "Peace be with you." And between his offering of God's peace, Jesus shows the disciples the marks in his hands and side from his crucifixion. Then it began to dawn on them. This was really Jesus. Jesus, who had been crucified, who had died, but who now was alive. And it says that the disciples "rejoiced" when they saw "the Lord."

"Lord" is also a **huge** word in scripture. It does not mean only "Master" or "Leader." Lord is also one of the Hebrew scriptures' names for God. To say that the disciples saw "the Lord" is to say that they saw one who was not only their friend and companion and leader but who was truly the one sent from God. The disciples had hoped that this was true; they had risked everything to follow him and be his disciples. But when he had been put to death their dreams were destroyed; fear had replaced faith and sorrow had extinguished hope. Now Jesus' coming into their midst as Lord, bringing them the peace of God, reversed all that.

Then Jesus says something that is essential to truly understanding the meaning of this day. Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." God the Father sent the Son to restore the world to God and now that Son says, "That is now what I am sending *you* to do."

What do you think this statement tells us about the life of discipleship that Jesus calls us to? Well, for one thing it tells us that we do not practice our faith in order to protect or save ourselves. We practice our faith by living out the Gospel imperative to be “sent”. To go *out* into the world in God’s name. To become the living Body of Christ in the world for the benefit of *others*. To be a follower of Jesus after his resurrection is to be sent. In fact, the word "apostle" means "one who is sent." Like "peace" and "Lord," "send" is also a huge word in scripture—especially in the Christian scriptures.

In John's gospel “send” is used over and over about Jesus, the one whom God **sent** to redeem the world. When Jesus tells his followers that they are now being *sent*, he is not just inviting them to go, he is blessing them and commissioning them: God is sending you. That's why they were called and gathered in the first place: in order to be sent.

As Christians, when we gather every week for worship and bible study, and prayer and praise, we always finish by being sent. The Deacon proclaims this at the conclusion of every service:

Go forth into the world rejoicing in the power of the spirit.

Go forth in the name of Christ.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord

Go! Go! Go!

And if this makes you nervous because it sounds like more than you bargained for, then you need to be sure to hear the rest of this passage.

After Jesus told the disciples that he was sending them, it says that he "breathed on them." Now if you have heard even a few stories from either the Hebrew or Christian scriptures those words should sound familiar to you. In the book of Genesis, in the story of God forming the first human beings from the dust of the earth, it says God "breathed into their nostrils the *breath* of life" (Genesis 2:7). In Psalm 104, it says that when you, God, take away creatures' *breath*, they die and return to dust, but "when you send forth your spirit [or *breath*! They are the same word], they are created." Jesus *breathed* on the disciples and if that was not plain enough, his words told them what it meant: "Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus said. "Receive the *breath* of God." Receive the power of God. Receive the life of God. In that moment, the risen Christ raised those fearful, faithless followers to a renewed life. This is what Pentecost is: the giving of the Spirit, the giving of new life from God to God's people.

The Holy Spirit is what makes it possible for people to go when they are sent. The Spirit is God's presence that accompanies those who are sent. And the Spirit brings the content and the power for the task for which Christ's followers are sent.

Jesus says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Go and be my body in the world." That's what being gathered is all about: that the followers may be forgiven and renewed, sent and equipped, in order that all people may be reconciled to God.

Redemption through Christ means that while we were apart from God, while we were unaware of God, while we neither heard nor were even listening for God, God chose to take the initiative to reach out to us. To forgive our wrongdoings, our selfishness, our greed, our deception, our neglect of our sister or brother and to redeem us. In Christ we know that God never let go. God never abandoned us. God never rejected us. And by knowing that we can trust again. By knowing that God loved us, we can love. By knowing that God reached out, we can reach out.

Jesus sent his followers with the gift of the Holy Spirit to redeem the world and to sanctify lives in God's name. And God's redeeming work continues to this day—through those who continue in Jesus' name.

"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Not "they" but "we" must proclaim these words to people who need to hear them. Because if we do not do so, if we retain the sins of some, we have a profound impact on other people's ability to hear and accept God's forgiveness.

That is a heavy responsibility. A lot like, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

But that is why it is so important that we hear this story each year. So that through it Jesus can give us peace. So that through it Jesus can once again remind us of the gift of God's Spirit that we each received at our baptism. So that through it Jesus can remind us again that he is sending us to proclaim the Gospel of forgiveness and redemption. We need to know that through his word he again breathes the Holy Spirit, the breath of God, on us—recreating us as individuals and as a holy people, as his very own body, the church.

Pentecost was the day that the church was born. The day that the Spirit of God was given. And each one of us has life by the constant gift of God's breath of life. Each of us has faith in Jesus Christ and hope by the ongoing work of God's Spirit through the means of grace. Each of us, by the gift of that Spirit, is a disciple of Jesus, being sent forth in God's world in the company of the faithful.

The Spirit of God, the breath of God, the divine wind that blows where God wills, blows into us; it blows into our hearts and minds and souls; and it brings us the peace of God and sends us out to do God's work in the world. So, let us do so today and always. Let us each week listen to what our deacons call us to. And let us respond in kind

“GO IN PEACE TO LOVE AND SERVE THE LORD.”

“Thanks be to God.” Amen.