

St. Andrew's Cathedral
Jackson, Mississippi
Sermon for June 9, 2019 ~ The Day of Pentecost
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Anticipating the time when he would leave the Apostles, Jesus gave them some instructions and made some promises. One of his promises was this, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you" (John 14:16-17).

The Holy Spirit has been a neglected subject in Christian teaching through the centuries. Perhaps that is why the Holy Spirit is often misunderstood. For example, some have identified the Spirit with the individual conscience. The Holy Spirit has been identified with the human mind, a view that seems to deny the human freedom to choose or resist the will of God. Some people believe that the Holy Spirit is primarily (or solely) manifested in unusual outer actions such as speaking in tongues, loud noises, gestures, and dancing. In such instances, the Holy Spirit seems to take possession of the individual and completely control one's actions.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Hebrew word *ruah*, meaning "breath", is often used to speak of the Spirit of God. In this way, the writers referred to the nearness of God, involved in nature as well as the life-giving, reforming source of strength, involved with the entire community of nation of Israel and through the messages of the prophets.

The New Testament emphasis on the Holy Spirit takes a slightly different turn. The Holy Spirit is still taken to be God present with us, but the Holy Spirit of the New Testament points specifically to Jesus Christ *after* God has acted mightily in him to bring about redemption for all humankind. The Greek word *pneuma* can mean "breath or wind" but also means "will or soul." In the New Testament we have the record of Jesus' teaching on the Holy Spirit, the experience on the Day of Pentecost, and St. Paul's teaching to guide us to an understanding.

So, then, what can we say about the Holy Spirit? What do we mean when we say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken by the prophets?" Let me explore just three of many things we could say.

The Church Is Constituted And Reconstituted By The Holy Spirit. Pentecost is the day we celebrate the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus that he would send the Holy Spirit to those faithful ones who would be patiently waiting in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit constituted the Church on that day.

While it is true that in most respects we can call the Church a "human" institution, it is not merely that. The Church is not the creation of human beings, but of God through the Holy Spirit. Thriving, vibrant, fruitful churches hold that fact in mind and work at being faithful stewards of what has been entrusted to them by God the Holy Spirit. St. Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, "Now we have received not the Spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God."

The Holy Spirit Gives The Gifts That Are Necessary For The Continual Up building Of The Body Of Christ In The World. How does the Spirit continue to keep the Church going? How does the Spirit continually enable the Church to carry on its mission from age to age? Through the gifts that are given to the members of the Church in every time, place, and age.

I led a leadership course for twenty-five members of one of my parishes. We studied the theology of spiritual gifts and agreed that God gives the Church the gifts that are needed to do what God is calling the Church to do. Then we took a spiritual gifts inventory. The people were fascinated by the gifts that were given but distressed that nobody had the gift of evangelism. “We need the gift of evangelism in order to grow this congregation,” they said. “Let’s recruit some people with that gift.”

“Really,” I said. “Didn’t we agree that God knows what gifts are needed to do God’s work? Was God asleep at the switch here? What if we focused on using the gifts God has given to the fullest and see what God does with that?”

There is a bus stop I pass from time to time. Money was appropriated to install it but evidently not to maintain it. It is as though everybody thought that after it was erected it would take care of itself. God has made better provision for the Church! Not only did God constitute the Church through the Holy Spirit, God ensures its ongoing upkeep by the same Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives the gifts and as those gifts are expressed, the Church is built up.

The Spirit Inspires, Illumines, Empowers, Unites. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (I Corinthians 12:7).

There are at least 32 gifts listed in the Bible, most of them in four key passages of the New Testament. But it is very important that we not love the gifts more than the giver.

Referring back to St. Paul's words in First Corinthians: “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God” (I Corinthians 2:12).

Let's remember these things as we think about the Church in the power of the Spirit:

1. The gifts are for service
2. God assigns and empowers the gifts.
3. All Christians are included.
4. Only God knows the limit to the variety of gifts.

I want to give you two questions to reflect upon this week.

1. What are the gifts the Holy Spirit has given you for the building up of the body of Christ?
2. How are you employing those gifts right now?

When our son Ron was four years old, one evening at the dinner table, Gay and I were deep in conversation when he tapped me on the arm and handed me his glass of iced tea. When I turned to look at him, he said, “May I have some sugar please?” I picked up the sugar bowl and scooped out a spoonful of sugar. Just as I was about to pour it into his glass, I noticed that there was already sugar in the bottom of it. Plenty! So, I put the spoon back in the sugar bowl, pointed to the sugar that was already in the bottom of his glass, and said, “Stir what you’ve got.”

That’s my message for you this morning, for each of you and for all of you as I prepare to leave you. St. Andrew’s Cathedral already has all the gifts God wants you to have to carry on the mission of God in this place and this time. The Spirit and the gifts are ours to use for God’s purpose in the mission field at our doorstep! Stir what you've got.