

Divergence on the Lectionary - Day of Pentecost, All Years

First Reading

Acts 2:1–21

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

“And in the last days it shall be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;
even on my male servants and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.
And I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;
the sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,

before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.
And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' (ESV)

Or,

Numbers 11:24–30

So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it.

Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the Spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, "My lord Moses, stop them." But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 12:3b–13

...no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. (ESV)

Or,

Acts 2:1-21 (see above)

Gospel Text

John 20:19–23

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” (ESV)

Or,

John 7:37–39

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading(s)

Acts 2:1-21

In many churches on this Sunday, there will be celebrations that look like a birthday party. I’ve even heard of churches that bring out a birthday cake for Pentecost Sunday. To these folks, Pentecost marks the “birth of the Church,” and is to be celebrated as

such. It's certainly understandable. After a brief affirmation of belief in the Holy Spirit, both the Apostles' and the Nicene Creed go directly to belief in the "holy catholic Church." As if they were cause and effect. And to some degree it must be true. Surely there would be no Church apart from the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

But I am saddened that on the feast day that is devoted to the Holy Spirit we sometimes find ourselves celebrating ourselves, the Church. For that is what we are, aren't we? The Church? What other feast day is given to the celebration of the Third Person of the Trinity? I can't think of one. We, the church, in spite of all our flaws, are surely one of God's great miracles, but doesn't that miracle pale in the face of God bestowing Himself so lavishly on us in the Person of the Holy Spirit?

Throughout God's history with humankind, the Bible records the anointing of certain individuals with the Holy Spirit for certain purposes of leadership. But at the Pentecost God comes to dwell *within* a whole people. Prior to this moment, Holy Spirit lies like a mantle on the shoulders of the anointed. From this time forth Holy Spirit rises up from within us all like a well from which the whole world may drink. Every follower of Jesus is "pentecostal." We are all heirs of the promise quoted by Peter in our reading the one God made through Joel.

“And it shall come to pass afterward,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even on the male and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit.” (Joel 2:28–29, ESV)

And doesn't the world around us need a dream into which we can all be drawn? Doesn't it need a vision that lifts all our eyes? Doesn't it need in-Spiration to preach real Good News? Doesn't your heart cry out for someone to step up and give life and voice to that Gospel, that vision, that dream?

You are the one you've been crying out for. The same Holy Spirit that empowered Jesus to do all the things that He did is your gift from the Father. If you are reluctant, that is probably a sign that you're most qualified to take up the task. Your humility will be your safeguard. If you are afraid, it says that you recognize the enormity of the task entrusted to you, and its cost. But the gift given you for the work dwarfs the task, makes the cost laughable.

Pentecost is the day that God says to you and me, “My Son has done His part. Now I am coming to indwell you so that you can live into the call that My children have had since their first moments in the Garden. Bring My peace, My kingdom to reign over chaos and pain. It is my joy to entrust this work to you. Now go in My power, My joy, My strength. Go and love the world as I have loved it.”

Or,

Numbers 11:24–30

In our reading from Numbers this week, we might be tempted to see an anticipation of Pentecost. God sends His Spirit *upon* the seventy (plus two) for the purpose of leadership. A large group begins to prophesy (probably speaking in tongues). It is a rare instance in the Hebrew Scriptures where we find God anointing more than one or two gifted individuals at a time, and so there are certain superficial similarities.

But when I read Numbers 11 after decades in pastoral ministry I see an anticipation of life in the church. God’s people looking at one “anointed” individual and his/her crying out to God, “Please, Father, let them come to understand their own gift of the Holy Spirit?” “Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!” And it does seem as though Pentecost is a long sought answer to Moses’ prayer. But not really a type of Numbers 11.

I am suspicious of any pastor who wants to keep his/her own anointing separate and above that of the congregation. If there is one thing that is a sure and certain sign that the Spirit that is speaking is of God, it is the desire in that person that everyone around them share in, delight in that same Spirit in themselves. Contrariwise, any pastors who seek to preserve their own uniqueness in relationship to God seem to me to be serving another spirit altogether.

Governing a body of believers all of whom know and enjoy that kind of intimacy with God in the Spirit will be a difficult task, and not a particularly glamorous one. I sometimes suspect that this is why the role of “pastor” or “shepherd” is listed next to last among the ministries we find in Ephesians 4:11. We have little experience in the Church shepherding a congregation in whom the Holy Spirit flows so freely. Were the Holy Spirit to answer fully our (rather dangerous) prayers and come in power and might on the whole congregation, it would be messy at first. But that is Moses’ wish, and I hope one day it will be ours as well.

Second Reading(s)

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

Before I start, does anyone else get a little creeped out by the translation, “and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” When I read that, I recall my mother holding my nose as she poured foul medicine into my mouth so that I *had* to swallow. I was “made to drink.” And yet, when that verb, *potizo*, is translated everywhere else in the NT, it’s translated as “give to drink,” not “make to drink.” We were all given to drink of the same Spirit. Come on, translators!

Okay, rant over.

It isn’t uncommon in churches today to find workshops aimed at helping members “identify their gifts.” And yet, as many of those as I’ve read of or experienced, I haven’t yet seen one that included the list of gifts that Paul enumerates here. Granted, I don’t think Paul intended his list to be exhaustive, or that other gifts aren’t also important, but it makes me sad that we always skip these.

I can hear some responses now, “Oh, we don’t really skip them, we just don’t find them,” or, “Well, I mean, we do sort of recognize wisdom, and knowledge, and we recognize faith.” But Paul speaks here of wisdom and knowledge that *only* come through the Spirit, and faith that is greater than that which puts us in the pews on Sunday mornings, faith that inspires world-changing deeds, faith that stirs up extraordinary faith in others.

And that still doesn’t get us to dealing with healing, miracles, prophecy, tongues and interpretation.

What if... What if we were meant for more? What if walking in one (or likely more) of each of those gifts Paul named were our birthright in Christ? What if every Christian were empowered to do the extraordinary things Paul envisioned? What would the church be like? What kind of impact could we have on the world?

What if Christians, empowered with “wisdom” set out to find solutions to the world’s problems?

What if Christians, empowered with “knowledge” could see beyond the surface of things to see real motivations, real callings, real gifts in others?

What if Christians, speaking from a gift of prophecy, could release God’s vision for individuals, cities, nations, in a way that captured a people’s hearts and minds?

What if Christians, girded with extraordinary faith, stepped out to lead others into that envisioned future?

What if Christians, taking Jesus' example of healing seriously, began to expect real, immediate healing when they prayed?

What if Christians were so overwhelmed by God's goodness that they couldn't find words for their worship, and instead prayed in "various kinds of tongues?"

And what if other Christians, experiencing the same joy were empowered to give words to those "tongues" so that we all could share in the joy?

What would the church be like? What would the world be like?

Or,

Acts 2:1-21 (see above)

Gospel Text(s)

John 20:19-23

Two relatively brief points (I know, imagine that, from me?) on this text.

First, it occurs some 50 days prior to Pentecost, and here we have Jesus bestowing, breathing the Holy Spirit onto those gathered in the locked room. It raises the question, "Well, then what's the Pentecost event about if they've already received the Holy Spirit?"

I won't claim any real authority for my answer to this question, but it works for me. On this first Easter Day, Jesus breathed on His disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." From that point on the Holy Spirit dwelt in them. On the Day of Pentecost, that Spirit became active.

In the same way, I believe that every person who is baptized in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit receives the Holy Spirit at baptism. But in many, dare I say most Christians, the Holy Spirit within us remains largely inactive. The gifts that the Holy Spirit offers remain unused. Untarnished, but unused.

My sense on this is two-fold. One, God will not pour out a gift on us for which we are not ready, not prepared. That would lead to our destruction. Two, God respects our reticence. He is thoroughly kind, and will not force on us a sense of His Presence that we do not want. Though it may pain Him to stay at our arm's length, He will abide by that.

On this first Easter Day, the disciples were not ready to step into their gifts, not ready to experience fully the intimacy of the Holy Spirit. Fifty days later, they were.

Two - and I've made this point before - When Jesus says to the disciples that sins they forgive will be forgiven and sins that they don't forgive won't be forgiven, He isn't granting them the privilege of deciding what will and won't be forgiven. What He says is, "If you forgive the sins of any, they (the sins) have been forgiven." (The verb for forgiven is perfect, passive, indicative.) He doesn't say, "If you forgive the sins of any they *will be* forgiven." This is all intimately tied to the fact that He's just said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Now, because they've received the Holy Spirit, they will know what God has forgiven, and what they say will only be a reflection of that which is already true in God. We don't get to choose *which* sins are forgiven. The only answer to that is, "All of them." Our marvelous duty is to proclaim that which is already true.

Or,

John 7:37-39

There is a very interesting bit I picked up, doing some research on this passage from John 7. This is that it's quite possible, and even in my thinking, quite desirable to punctuate verse 38 differently than we do.

We can, and probably should put the closed quote marks after "the one believing in me." From that point forward, it is the narrator speaking, not Jesus. So it would read this way

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On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink, the one believing in me."

As the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

This reading has some scholarly support, but more importantly to me, it is also the reading supported by a number of ancient witnesses, including Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Jerome, and Theodore of Mopsuestia.

I think it makes better sense of the whole section here. It explains that Jesus spoke of the Spirit from whom the thirsty might drink, which, while it will one day flow from all His followers, did not yet, because He had not been glorified. He was inviting the thirsty to drink of His Spirit at that point.

One other question to ask (and potentially answer) of this passage. Where in Scripture does it speak of this water that flows from someone's belly? After looking at a few suggested answers, I tend to agree that the narrator speaks here, and is referring to Isaiah 55:1. What other possibilities occur to you?