

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
The Feast Day of Pentecost  
The Reverend Barbara A. Hutchinson

Today we celebrate the Feast Day of Pentecost, often known as the birth of the church, since as Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, he was breathing into their very being, Jesus' own mission, of bringing all of creation back into unity with God. We wear red today to symbolize the tongues of fire which descended upon the disciples heads, and we will be releasing butterflies at the end of our service, to symbolize the release of the Holy Spirit from our church into the world. It's a festive day. It's a day when we recognize that the Spirit cannot be possessed, nor contained, nor guarded. The Holy Spirit, instead, possesses us and sets us free to continue Jesus' mission of bringing the brokenness of the world to God for healing.

Now the fact that Luke, as the author of Acts, sets the giving of the Holy Spirit to the disciples on the Feast of Pentecost has particular meaning. This ancient Israelite festival day was originally designed as an opportunity to offer their first fruits of their harvest in a ritual thanksgiving to God. But by Jesus' time, this festival day had evolved to become a commemoration and celebration of the giving of the 10 commandments to Moses. Luke demonstrates, that rather than God enabling one person to be touched by God, God intends to touch all people; rather than God intending God's words for one nation; God intends for all of humankind to live in a place of shalom or peace and unity; and that the laws have been fulfilled by Christ's breathing the spirit upon the disciples. It was not actually Jesus' life and death that fulfilled the law; it was actually the giving of Christ's mission to the world, which fulfills the law. That makes this all very real to each one of us. We are called to take this responsibility of carrying out Christ's mission seriously, and to do it in conjunction with the movement of the Holy Spirit.

We acknowledge the grace and gift of the Spirit working within our lives through rituals in our church; wherein our baptism we were sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own; wherein our confirmation, the bishop says this ancient prayer: Defend O Lord your servant with your heavenly grace, that he or she may continue yours for ever and daily increase in your Holy Spirit more and more. And each time we celebrate the Eucharist, we invoke the Holy Spirit to make this bread and wine the body and blood of Christ, to be holy gifts for God's holy people, which in turn nourish us to become Christ's hands and feet in the world, drawing the world toward wholeness. In each of these sacramental acts, we acknowledge and claim our part in the ever-widening circle begun in Acts. And our work is to build this community of Spirit-filled people, ripple by ripple, until we are in unity with each other, with our creation, and with our Creator God.

To do this, I believe we always need to be attentive to the new language or languages God is teaching us. Just as when the Spirit came upon the disciples and they were able to speak new languages and learn new tongues so that there could be unity among people, rather

than the disparity among people achieved through the Tower of Babel, so must we reflect upon the new language God is teaching each one of us individually and also what new language God has been teaching us as a parish this past year.

For the Feast Day of Pentecost reminds us that we are a moving on people. The Spirit is alive within us and therefore we called to move upon her invitation. This doesn't necessarily mean we are called to move onto a new physical place, but rather we are called to move more deeply into the mystery of God, by learning the complex language of God, and then to speak those words in an ever-widening breath of compassion and love.

All of us are called to learn this complex language of God, and for some of us, it occurs by being fluent in a number of spoken languages. It was obvious to me last week that Dr. Rigone, who spoke to us about the project in Haiti, was a polyglot, one who is fluent in a number of languages, who with ease, is capable of thinking in different language systems, and moving between languages as is prudent.

I found it fascinating that as she told the story of sitting down with the village elders to discuss the idea of a medical clinic, she trusted this important conversation to a language, which was not her native one. We all know how complicated a facilitated conversation of this sort can be when we're all speaking the same language which is also our native language. I'm sure you've all been on boards or vestries or community groups where you've had these hard conversations when you are trying to pull a common vision from a multitude of individual visions! We know this is not easy under any circumstances.

However, I imagine that by Dr. Rigone, entering into that place of vulnerability, by not relying upon her native language as her means of communication, but rather by meeting the elders in the language they are most comfortable with, this elicited their trust, and her real language came through - the language of love.

For that's the language of the Holy Spirit. God meets us where we are and the Holy Spirit draws us deeper into the language of God: love, compassion, tolerance, mercy, forgiveness, activism, hope and joy.

I would like to share with you my personal journey deeper into the language of God: into compassion over this past year, so that you may similarly reflect upon how God has been drawing you into God's language this year as well.

I believe, this year, through the work of the Holy Spirit, I have learned in greater depth the language of compassion. It all began when one of our members asked me to be on the Board of Women in Need. I accepted and soon found that I yearned for deeper involvement with the real women in need, rather than coming together once a month and organizing fund raising. I needed to find my passion around the work or the organization, and did so by completing the training to be a PA Advocate for victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Sadly, the words, which taught me the language of compassion, were the swollen faces of abuse victims, and the scared voices on the other side of the shelter hotline call, and the horror of the statistics of 1 in 3 women would be abused, and in the hand which tightly held mine in the Chambersburg Hospital Room after an assault. My list could go on and on, but I won't, because I know how difficult this subject is for us to discuss.

All I can tell you is that I would never have expected that I would have been brought into the knowledge that I have about the network of pain that is created by one violent act. When it has been particularly difficult to bear this pain and continue on the path the Spirit was leading me on toward greater compassion for women in need, I remembered the image of the tongues of fire on the disciples' heads. Sometimes the Holy Spirit shows up and ushers us into places we would have preferred not to go. The Holy Spirit, which can be a cleansing fire, is often that which strips from us our illusions from time to time. I was taught the deeper language of compassion by real people who have entered into my life this year and drew me into a place of empathy and love.

Perhaps the Holy Spirit was gentler with you this past year. Perhaps you have learned the language of God through deepening prayer, or through finding your healing gifts as you felt the power of the Spirit moving through you as you placed your loving hands on someone's head who asked for your prayers; or perhaps you have learned the language of tolerance by people who have come into your life that you expected not to accept; or perhaps you've learned the language of love by soaking up the scriptures and gaining life-changing revelation around the Spirit of truth, into which we are all guided.

I encourage each of you to reflect on how God has taught you the language of God's love this past year. It may have been by the desire of your heart to become less critical of others; or in that nagging whisper in your heart to forgive that person whom you don't want to. It is good to trust that God is in all this work. That when you look back and suddenly remember phrases or experiences which have stuck with you, that there really are no coincidences, only connections, connections offered to you by the Holy Spirit.

Have you been learning the language of discernment, or wisdom, or tolerance? Has God shown you through the experiences of this past year how to forgive yourself or one another, not 7 times, but 70 times? Have you, like me, learned compassion in a whole new way, because your heart has come alive through prayer and meditation? Has God used silence, not words, to teach you this language? These are all good things for us to ponder.

As we understand the movement of the Holy Spirit within our individual lives and through our communal life here at St. Andrew's as a means to empower us to reunite all of humanity and creation with God, it is also wise to reflect upon how we have expressed the language of love to those within our parish and within our community. I certainly would say we have through our healing ministry, which meets the needs of our parishioners with

prayers monthly and which is ready to be launched into our community through an ecumenical prayer group.

I certainly would say we have spoken the language of love to the people who have come into our parish home to receive a warm meal and friendly smiles. There's one young girl who has come each of the three times we've offered meals thus far. Her name is Megan and she's almost 4 years old, although she's small for her age. I was delighted last Monday when, after dinner, she freely twirled around among the tables, with the skirt of her dress, floating with joy. She scurried off to the ramp between the church and the PLC and ran up and down it multiple times and hung on the hand rail, as our children regularly do each Sunday during coffee hour. I had a sense we had spoken to her in words of God's love: acceptance, true hospitality, and grace.

As part of our vestry meetings, we reflect upon where we felt God's presence and what were the highlights of the past month. These moments are often when the language of God, the language of love, has been spoken the loudest.

The same Holy Spirit, who was with God in creation, the same Holy Spirit which Jesus breathed upon his disciples on the Day we call Pentecost, is the same Holy Spirit, moving within us, drawing us deeper into the language of love, which draws us into unity with each other and with God.

To paraphrase the Jesuit monk and prolific author, Thomas Merton, the truest form of communication is communion. This is our goal: communion with each other and with God. This is what we're working toward - that image with the holy spirit dancing on each of our heads, uniting us together in God's holiness, drawing us into communion to be the church. May we listen closely for to learn the language of God, which of course, is love. Amen.