

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Feast Day of Pentecost
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
June 4, 2017

I was meeting a friend for lunch on Friday at Panera Bread. As I opened the door to the restaurant, there was a sign posted there that said, "Yes! I like surprises. Try Panera". I pondered for a moment whether I do indeed like surprises and also what that might have to do with eating at Panera. As I stood with Virginia, for what seemed like ten minutes, reviewing multiple times the menu listed on the wall, I found myself a bit disoriented. There were one or two sandwiches or options that seemed familiar to me, but by and large, most of their offerings were new, often with that fact advertised. I scanned the board to see if my favorite chicken-salad sandwich was there and was a bit dismayed to see that it no longer had a place on the menu board. So, I thought, 'well, if this is what surprises are all about, everything constantly changing, some of my "go-to" choices having been eliminated, and so many brand-new things to imagine all at once, I'm pretty sure I don't like surprises.' For you see, I'm the kind of person that has a favorite meal at a favorite restaurant and almost always orders it, because I know I'm going to love it, and I like that certainty of knowing what to expect and knowing I'll be pleased with it.

By definition, a surprise is an unexpected or astonishing event, fact, or thing. We can label surprises as good or bad, with a good surprise perhaps being a phone call from a childhood friend that you hadn't spoken previously to for decades, or a particularly thoughtful and meaningful gift received at your birthday that shows you that someone really knows who you are. A bad surprise might be what you thought was just a slight cough turning out to be something doctors seem concerned about, or at least for me, a bad surprise would be a surprise party given for me, where suddenly I am the center of attention.

However, the part that I pondered at the doorway of Panera was the unexpected part of a surprise. For unexpected means out of our control, or not initiated by us, something happening to us, or something that can often pull at the seam of the reality we have carefully constructed for ourselves. In fact, the origin of the word surprise is from Latin, then French, and means seized from above, referring to an unexpected seizure or attack on troops. This doesn't always feel comfortable; in fact, it rarely does. And since a surprise so abruptly changes our reality, we may actually feel some grief that life has suddenly changed. It would be an overstatement to say I was experiencing grief on Friday at Panera, when my chicken-salad sandwich was not on the menu wall, but I was feeling disoriented, a bit perplexed and mildly irritated. These also, are not comfortable feelings.

So, the interesting part of this inner-dialogue to me was that I was working on my sermon for this morning and I realized that Pentecost is all about surprises. Even though the disciples were waiting for the Holy Spirit to arrive as Jesus had told them she would, there would have been nothing in their imaginations to prepare them for the sound of fire and wind roaring through their community. They had to have been flabbergasted and stunned by the tongues of fire and

the blowing of the wind. Surprise, the Spirit had shown up, in unexpected ways! Surprise, you now have words to speak and work to do! Surprise, you are now a people with a mission, you are now a church! Pentecost is a day for surprises that we cannot control or manipulate any more than we can the fire of the Spirit. Today we celebrate the arrival of the Holy Spirit in this startling and unbelievable event as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, yet of course, the Holy Spirit is showing up in our lives and in our church every moment, startling us into a new reality. Sometimes, this is exciting, energizing and life-giving. And sometimes, because it is out of our control, because it is not initiated by us, and because sometimes what has been given new life, it results in something else dying or ending or given a Sabbath time to rest, the movement of the Holy Spirit evokes emotions of disorientation, confusion, irritation and often grief. When the Holy Spirit alighted on my heart and illumined my call to the priesthood, there was great joy, but also grief, for I knew the life I had lived and the life I had looked forward to living needed to die, in order for the new life in the Spirit to be given birth.

As I began to list in my mind all the moments and movements of the Holy Spirit we've experienced here at St. Andrew's over the past five or six years, I was pretty amazed. These are all times when I have been certain we have followed the nudging of the Spirit, when the Spirit has offered new ways of thinking about or doing our ministry, or deepening our spiritual lives, and building our community. I believe that I and others see them as life-giving and energizing, and I bet there are also some of us who experience a sense of disorientation, bewilderment, sometimes irritation, and often grief, that life has changed.

It breaks my heart sometimes that many of you sitting here today don't know who I am speaking of when I refer to Deacon Janice, this beautiful soul, whose face would light up when she laughed, or whose steadiness in faith inspired confidence in God in all those gathered by a hospital bed, who was raised up by this parish for ordination and who served here faithfully for years, and who died two years ago from a recurrence of cancer. I was lamenting the fact that we don't have any photographs of her here at St. Andrew's when I was out visiting with Kathy and Ed Smith, and Ed did this most amazing thing for us, and created this collage of photographs of Janice, which I can share with you. Being with people who don't know Janice, who was raised up by this parish and shaped this parish can be disorienting to many of us, and yet, I see the movement of the Holy Spirit alighting on quite a number of you who are exploring a calling to ordained ministry, so the Spirit who called forth Janice in ministry is still here, calling others, giving new life and shape to the calling.

How we do outreach here has shifted, where now the Spirit has set on fire the hearts of our young people who engage in Youth Mini-Mission events almost monthly, who learn first-hand how to care for people they are serving food to, or helping to learn English, or planting a garden for, and yet some of our tried and true worthy traditions are ending, like the Pumpkin Patch. There's got to be grief around that, with the Spirit moving in different and new directions, allowing somethings to end, so others can be given birth to.

How we come together as a parish to have fun has shifted from regularly scheduled pot-lucks or a Welcome Back Picnic at a park, to gatherings at my home, as with our adult formation

program, where we settle into relaxed conversation, enjoy a meal together, and explore our journey with Jesus together, where we really have fun and experience a beautiful closeness as friends, or to joining with our community meal team, through cooking together, we get to know each other, laughing often and sharing stories, or picking apples from an orchard ground on a beautiful clear autumn day, or washing and oiling the pews in the church on a Parish Work Day and enjoying a meal afterwards. Things have shifted, and just like not seeing my favorite chicken-salad sandwich on the menu wall at Panera, it can feel disorienting and even slightly irritating, when some of the things we loved are no longer here. It's okay to own that.

How we involve children in worship has expanded from the traditional role of acolytes to inviting them to impose ashes, wash feet on Maundy Thursday, stand behind the altar, serve the elements. The birth of this new life-giving practice of involving the children in sacramental moments may for some feel like the death of the quiet, calm, and settled worship time. I understand that. But I'll tell you, I saw it only as the movement of the Holy Spirit last week when Alexander was an acolyte, lector, trombonist, and Eucharistic server. I believe God was praised. And wait until you see where the Spirit is leading us to create a sensory experience with God for children of all abilities. The Spirit has been busy in our hearts.

There are probably many more examples of ways the Spirit has taken charge of our life together and set us off on a new direction. Some may only be known to you, but I'd love to talk with you about your experiences.

Pentecost is a time of celebrating God's surprises in our lives. Often, it's fun and exhilarating to run and catch up with the Spirit who is leading us into new life, new ways of being, new callings to answer, new ways of being church. And sometimes, it's hard, and we feel out of breath, and we want things to slow down, or return to what was. I think this is a very natural reaction because surprises are unexpected and we can be thrown off by the lack of our control, or by the direction the Spirit is moving us toward, one that we may not have chosen ourselves.

The Holy Spirit is a wild and crazy thing and yet it always empowers us to join with the first disciples in witnessing to the truth of the risen Christ. I think this is one of most helpful things for me to remember when I'm feeling exhausted by the changes the Holy Spirit is demanding of me – it's for a good purpose. It's so I can be a more faithful witness to what lights up my life, to what offers me joy, to what gives my life purpose, what inspires me to become the best I can be – the presence of Jesus in my life. The gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples and to us is to communicate to everyone they and we encounter what God has done in Jesus. So, here's your challenge, sit down with someone and talk about your "God moments", your moments when you were certain it was the Holy Spirit nudging you toward something brand new, your moments when Jesus showed up in a whole new way in your life. Share too how you felt about that God-surprise in your life. And then speak too of how that encounter with God has empowered you to witness to the truth of the risen Christ, for life in Christ is the Spirit's business: giving, tending and fulfilling it. And our faithful work is running, not away from, which sometimes we would prefer to do, but toward the new life offered to us and to our church. Amen.