

“Receive the Holy Spirit”

John 20: 19 – 23

Makemie Presbyterian Church

May 31, 2009 Pentecost

**John 20: 19 - 23**

<sup>19</sup>When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

<sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

<sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

This ends the reading.

Two thoughts as we begin today's celebration – the birthday of the church. First off, I remember my dad & I, he was a great football fan & we used to sit around together & listen to the games, you know. And I remember a story he told me about Johnny Unitas. Johnny Unitas was a quarterback of the Baltimore Colts & they had this phenomenal rivalry with the Los Angeles Rams & my dad told me about the day that the Rams & the Colts had been laying a particularly brutal game. And he told me that Johnny Unitas went into the locker room during halftime, he leaned over his sink & looked into the mirror touched his bruised & bleeding face tenderly, & looked himself in the eye & said, "There has got to be an easier way for me to meet congenial people my own age."

Next, The Holy One sent his disciple to the tailor to have a shirt made for a very important upcoming event. The Tailor said, "No problem. No problem. Come back in a week & with the help of God, I'm sure I can finish."

When the disciple went back the next week the tailor said, "I'm so sorry, please come back next week & with God's blessing the shirt will be ready." At the third week the tailor said to the disciple, "I'm so sorry, tell

your teacher to try again on Saturday & if God wills it so the shirt will be done.”

The next day the Holy One said to the disciple, “I want you to go back & ask the tailor how long will it take to finish the shirt if he keeps God out of it.”

So a few light moments to begin our celebration because today is Pentecost the birthday of the church, & it is celebrated in many ways all around the world. I was once in Birmingham Alabama when church people gathered in the civic center, hundreds & hundreds of people, with a full orchestra & great singing, all to celebrate the birthday of the church. Once in St. Petersburg Florida people gathered for a marvelous service, then went outside & released thousands of balloons. A friend of ours says it was the custom in Scotland when she was growing up to have a Pentecost parade through the streets of Edinburgh.

The church traditionally celebrates the birth of the church on Pentecost, a Jewish holiday that falls fifty days after Passover, which is essentially fifty days after Easter. It was a day on which the Jews celebrated God's giving of the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai. Pentecost was about the giving of the law,

the revelation of God through the commandments & it is this understanding of Pentecost that serves as the background for the well known account of Pentecost in Acts. As you may or may not know, there are two accounts of Pentecost in the New Testament. One is a loud & large celebration; the other is a small & quiet observance. I would like to look briefly at each account. Luke is the host at the large & loud celebration of the birth of the church. John is the host at the quiet & small celebration.

Luke's account, in the second chapter of Acts, is familiar to Christians everywhere. It takes place in Jerusalem. There were 120 people in the house & thousands of people in the streets for the festival of Pentecost. Suddenly it happens. Luke tries to describe it by saying that it was as if a very violent wind had swept through the room. There was a fire, the fire shaped itself into tongues & the people began to speak in other languages. The crowd was astonished & gathered around as Simon Peter stood up to preach & said, "God has given the Holy Spirit." After the sermon, three thousand people confessed faith in Christ & were baptized. It was a marvelous thing.

Luke's description of the birth of the church is based on Exodus 20 in the Old Testament. Since Pentecost was the celebration of the giving of the

law, Luke describes the Holy Spirit in the same way. As you may remember, in Exodus 20 the people are before the mountain of God, Mount Sinai, & they are afraid. It is a strange day, cloudy with a strong wind & the people, scared to death say to Moses, “We can’t stand it! You go up there & find out what God wants & come back & tell us.” So Moses goes up the mountain. There is violent wind & fire.

When Luke wants to describe the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church, he draws upon Exodus 20, that powerful wind-driven moment in the history of Israel. Everywhere over the Christian world, Protestant or Catholic, any congregation that desires to repeat or keep alive the experience that Luke describes in Acts 2, of whatever denomination, is called “Pentecostal.”

The other Pentecost celebration is quiet. It is in a house in Jerusalem. Some of the disciples are there; how many or which ones, I don’t know. The door is locked because they are scared. Jesus has been put to death, & now he is alive again. “What is going to happen to us?” They are intimidated, frightened. They had locked the door & though the door didn’t open, suddenly Christ is with them. Christ says, “Peace be with you,” & they don’t flinch; they don’t respond, for they aren’t sure who this is before them. And then Jesus shows his hands where he had been nailed; he

shows his side where he had been speared. Then they recognize him & are glad saying, "It is the Lord!"

Then Jesus says it again, "Peace be with you." This time his word is a very important blessing to them. "As the Father sent me, now I send you. What I have done in my life is now up to you to continue; you will have to keep it going." And then a strange thing happens: Jesus breathes on them. In this story there is not a big violent wind, but a human breath & a human word, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

This too is Pentecost, but instead of describing it in the light of Exodus 20, the thundering & frightening moment at Sinai, John describes it in the light of Genesis 2: "God breathed into their nostrils & they became living souls." Have you ever thought about that? In the beginning, God had made everything else: the bouncy kangaroo, the squirrels, the big Goliath grouper, the moose, the Snow Geese, and all the other things that are in your garden while you are here at church. God had already made those. Then God out of clay made a person.

What if – let's scare ourselves a minute – what if God had not imparted God's own Spirit to this being? The human would be like an animal. Can you imagine people living like animals because they hadn't

received the Spirit of God? Just think about it/. The whole of life (this is a strain on the imagination but stay with me) would be devoted to eating & drinking & sleeping & eliminating & being attracted to the opposite sex & dying. Like animals. Now animals can be trained of course. A trained animal is a little more valuable. It can do tricks, stand on its hind legs, take a paw & count to ten – all kind of things that make it more valuable. If human beings lived like animals, they could be taught tricks, some even taught to work. This would add a great deal to their value; not all of them, but some could be trained to work.

Without the Spirit of God, human beings could even develop lines of pedigree. Like a dog or cat or horse, human beings could call themselves “purebred,” claim to be from the best line. Hey could say things like, “She’s from one of the better families.” That is pedigree. Or, “We are children of Abraham.” See, that adds to value. So if God hadn’t breathed into our nostrils God’s own breath, we still could strut & have shows & brag about our families & eat & drink & sleep & die. That would be it.

But God took this creature made out of clay, held it up as a mother holds a baby & breathed, & it became a living soul like God. And God said, “This one is like me. I am proud of the squirrel, I love the bouncy kangaroo,

the horse is good, the mule is nice & I do like these llamas, but the one that is exactly like me is this one. I have breathed into this one my own life.”

This is why human beings are not content, if they are real human beings, with just eating & drinking & working & showing off & bragging & dying.

Real human beings long for God, search the heavens, write poetry, play music, spread art all over the world & think the things of God. We human beings perhaps even spend time pondering if, after we die, we live again, since we have the breath of God. This is extraordinary. So extraordinary in fact, that the most horrible thing that we can imagine is for the breath of God, the Spirit of God, to be taken away from us.

When old David was king he went out & made war & killed people & bragged about it. He came back to Jerusalem for some rest & saw a beautiful woman who was married to another man, one of David's soldiers. The soldier was out in the field, & David took that man's wife. “Well, I am the king,” he thought. He had a child with that man's wife & had that soldier sent to the front lines to be killed. The prophet Nathan came & said to David, “You did it, didn't you?” And David felt like an animal. Killing, eating, drinking, drawn to the opposite sex. An animal. And then David prayed. Do you remember

his prayer? “O God, do not take back your breath. Do not take your Holy Spirit from me, because I would be an animal again.”

And so it is that John says the Son of God took a little bunch of disciples, with nothing remarkable about any of them. Most were fishermen, one was a tax collector, another was a militant, Simon the Zealot – nationalist, militant, sword-carrying Simon. They were an odd bunch, really, & Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” In that house in Jerusalem, as quiet as a man’s breathe, they received the Holy Spirit – and that group became the church. Yes, they became the church, worshipping God, writing scripture, praying, & seeking to think & do God’s will. They became the church, going out & serving other people who are not even grateful, hurting when anybody else hurts, emptying their pockets for other people’s children, building a Habitat house when their own house is in need of repair & the paint is peeling, going to the woman’s house & mowing her lawn when their own grass is twelve inches high.

Who are these people? They are the people on whom God has breathed. They are the people on whom Christ has breathed. They have received the Holy Spirit.

What would happen to a church if the Spirit of God was withdrawn? It could stay alive for a number of weeks, maybe even months. If you have personality & a lot of talent & a good bit of money & have some projects & a few parties, a dead church can go on for weeks, delaying the inevitable obituary. The prayer of the church, "Do not take away your Holy Spirit," is what makes us a church.

I can't describe the Holy Spirit. I can't explain precisely the Spirit of God. Jesus himself said it is like a mystery, like the wind. You do not see the wind, & yet you know when it comes & when it goes.

Luke gives us a really loud, attractive, boisterous, unforgettable Pentecost, and all who try to be that way as church are called "Pentecostals." But John gives us a Pentecost too: the breath of Christ on his followers & we become the church. Peace I give you. And then Christ breathes on us. Saying, "receive the Holy Spirit." Christ breath fills us with purpose & meaning.

What causes this? And someone said, "The Spirit. The breath of God. The wind of God. Do you believe this? Amen.