

Light, power and air

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Day of Pentecost, Whitsunday, on May 15, 2016.

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.
Acts 2:2

The Feast of Pentecost marks the culmination of the fifty days of Easter. This day is also traditionally known as Whitsunday because those being baptized were clothed in white. In the Jewish tradition, Pentecost was the Jewish agricultural festival of the Feast of Weeks. It was an offering of thanksgiving to God for the first fruits from the winter planting of grain. It also commemorated the giving of the Torah to God's people.

Our Christian celebration of this Day of Pentecost commemorates the apostles receiving the power of God's Holy Spirit. It is on this day that they are sent out to do the work of God. As they are gathered together, they witness the phenomenon of a loud, rushing wind that overwhelms them with a sense of God's power and presence. They are given the gifts for ministry including wisdom, knowledge, faith, counsel, healing, miracles, discernment, prophecy and strength. Because their mission will take them to many places and people, they are also given the gift to speak and interpret different languages in all parts of the world. All these gifts come from God's Holy Spirit to be used for the common good.

The central message of Christianity is that God's work of redemption gives value and worth to all humanity. Just as we take our empty bottles and cans to a redemption center to receive the value of their deposit, the church is a redemption center where we give value and worth through forgiveness. Jesus commissioned the disciples with the power and authority to declare forgiveness of sins in God's name.

One of the least known and most misunderstood of the Episcopal Church's sacramental rites is Confession or penance. The rule is that all may, some should, but none must. And, I would add, few do. What is important to know is that we confess our sins to God and it is God who forgives us. The priest is there for counsel and to assure us of our forgiveness.

A distinctive mark of forgiveness is the quality of mercy. When we are offended, there is something in our psyche that wants revenge, to get even, to settle a score. An ancient Greek proverb tells us that mercy is better than vengeance. It saves us from committing a greater offense by putting things into perspective. The quality of mercy as the mark of the Christian is essential in these confusing and perplexing times when we are tempted to react inappropriately in a way that we would regret. In Shakespeare's, *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia says to Shylock:

The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

Merchant of Venice, Act 4, scene 1

One of the most powerful examples has been seen in courtrooms where one who has lost a loved one through violence has the opportunity to confront the offender. We could understand if they unleashed their hurt and anger at the offender but there are those who choose instead to forgive them. By so doing, they are releasing themselves from their hurt and anger. There is something so very powerful when a person's capacity to forgive is greater than their hurt.

C.S. Lewis wrote that everyone thinks that forgiveness is a lovely idea, until we have something to forgive. It is said that there are two people living inside us. One is willing to be compassionate and merciful and not bear a grudge while the other is lacking in mercy by saying I can forgive, but I can't forget. Both anger and resentment are barriers to mercy.

Martin Luther King, apostle of non-violent resistance to the evil of racism, said that if you are devoid of the power to forgive, you are without the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us, but no one is beyond redemption. If God can forgive and be merciful in forgiving the worst in us, we have the capacity to be merciful to the worst in others. Even the most manipulative and controlling personality can be redeemed. A good test of knowing that our forgiveness is complete is when we don't remember what an offense was about.

The same Spirit of God who at Pentecost poured upon the apostles the gifts of wisdom, understanding, healing and mercy pushes us out of our comfort zone. These gifts help us with the challenges of living in a multicultural world. They teach us tolerance and understanding of diverse people from other nations, races and languages. The Spirit breaks down the barriers that separate us.

Robert Frost's classic poem, *Mending Wall* questions why we have walls. In his poem, he and his neighbor walk along the wall each spring to replace the stones that have fallen out of place. When he asks why there is a wall his neighbor only responds, "Good fences make good neighbors." The poet asks, "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out, and to whom I was like to give offense. Something there is that doesn't love a wall."

The Pentecost experience of the power of God's Holy Spirit includes the spiritual imagery of fire. When you sit by a fire the glow of the embers continues as long as they are together. If you remove one of the embers, its glow fades until it loses its brightness and grows cold. Just as the ember loses its light and power when separated from the rest of the fire, when we are separated from each other in the Christian community our source of power fades and grows cold.

There is awesome firepower in the energy that the apostles received through the Holy Spirit. Their mission to bring the hope of reconciliation to the world began with just twelve people who drew in other disciples to work with them. What began with those twelve has grown to over two billion Christians. As long as we are connected with each other the bright glow of God's Holy Spirit is evident in us as our witness to God's mercy and love.