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Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

May 24, 2015; The Day of Pentecost

Readings: Acts 2:2-21; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15.

When the Spirit Comes

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

And people who saw this said they were drunk.

So the beginning of the Church, the birth of the Church, was to those witnessing the event, chaotic and crazy, and misunderstood.

But Peter says, no, and then he puts it in context...not drunk, but as the Prophet Joel described -- the Spirit will be poured out...and people will prophesy and dream dreams.

I can imagine some who heard this thought that was crazy...being drunk they could understand.

This life in the Spirit can take us to some new places, give us new ideas, and look odd to others...it can be counter-cultural and often is.

Michael Curry, bishop of North Carolina, and also one of the nominees for our next Presiding Bishop, calls this being a crazy Christian...it is going to look crazy to those who live this life with an unenlightened self-interest, as Bishop Curry puts it.¹

After all being filled with the Spirit, we do dream God's dream for the creation, do we not?

Being filled with the Spirit, we speak the truth in love as we are able...able

¹ <https://www.churchnext.tv/school/catalog/course/how-to-be-a-crazy-christian-with-michael-curry/>

to discern the truth and able to speak it.

The Spirit is with us, but more than that the Spirit is active among us, and the movements of the Spirit are discerned in community.

Active, moving, motivating, sustaining, stirring, provoking--
the Holy Spirit can be described using these words and more.

Comforter of course.

Our church was named for the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost is our special day, our Feast Day, our day to remember and reflect upon who we are called to be as a community named for the Holy Spirit.

Certainly we are called to comfort those in need of comfort, and we do so, in the many ways that we offer care to the sick, the lonely and those in need.

Just last Sunday we blessed prayer shawls created by members of our church.

The shawls are given as signs and a concrete expression of our love and care for others, and as a sign of God's love for and with them, surrounding them as a shawl does.

The group has started making shawls for newborn babies in our church family, and I love to think of the little baby who is receiving our first one, to have that sign of God's love for her, right there, keeping her warm.

So yes, Comforter in the sense of caring for, being with, in a gentle loving way...but there is much more to the Spirit.

Many of you have heard the saying that the Church, led by the Spirit, should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

The Spirit can be provocative, challenging, and often calls us and others out of our/their comfort zone.

Getting back to this church being named for the Holy Spirit, makes me

wonder...how names can influence or fit a person.

Sometimes we think that a name just fits a person, for some reason. Over our history, this church has been certainly a comfort to many in need, but also a challenge to some and provocative.

Was this always so?

Did we grow into our name? Right from the start our church challenged the norms by having candles on the altar...radical for this area in 1901.

Do people come to our church in part because of our name...who want comfort in part, because we all do at some level, we need it and God wants us to have that, but do people also come here because the name makes them think that we might be open to

new ideas, new truth, that we might be open to

courageously challenging injustice, being strengthened by the Spirit to do so?

I hope those looking for such a life of faith will come here because that is who we are.

One more comment on the name, of a lighter nature before I resume my serious mode.

When I first came to you, to this church, as an intern in the summer of 1999, interns do at times come back, when I told my seminary friends at VTS that I was going to do my summer internship at the Church of the Holy Comforter....they laughed.

I didn't get it; they had to explain to me that when they say they are going to the Church of the Holy Comforter they mean they are staying in bed (under the comforter).

So ironic really, since this church is about getting up, being active, and moving forward.

Of course a name is just a name, but as I think about it, we really are a church of the Holy Spirit...and you have been over the hundred plus years...often pushing at the boundary of what was acceptable or just running right over it at times.

And I'm going way back, such as when seventy some years ago the rector here, Cary Montague decided to start visit people in prison in the name of God, seeing those people as people...he was the first to do so in Richmond...to start what we now call Prison Ministry.

Under the leadership of the Rev. Fletcher Lowe this church took strides in developing and expanding Outreach ministries, and embraced liturgical change that led to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.

In the early 1980s, when the AIDS crisis was really new and scary, this church had a banner that said, "This Church as AIDS," which was displayed outside.

That was brave...the Spirit calls us to be brave, the Spirit fills us so that we can be brave...and do what is right, not because it is safe or popular, but because it is right, and as much as we are able to know, it seems to be that God is calling us to do the hard, brave thing.

This can be true for us as a church community and for you as an individual in your workplace or in your family or among your friends. Sometimes we really have to struggle to do what God calls us to do, and at other times, just being the people, or the church, God has created us to be, puts us where we need to be for God. Doing what we need to do, without much thought or struggle.

The Holy Spirit is symbolized by fire and the color red because the Spirit burns hot, and can get us fired up.

I think of John Wesley who wrote of his heart strangely warmed, burning within him, as he was coming to know God better and know his call in the world...what eventually led to the Methodist Church...when the Anglican Church was not open to new ideas, not open to the movement of the Spirit, one could say.

All this makes me think of the Book of Revelation, chapter 3...where we hear repeated several times, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

And we are cautioned not to be lukewarm...it would be better if we were hot or cold, rather than being lukewarm. Many times this church has been on fire, being guided by the Spirit, rather than being lukewarm.

I think of the time Holy Comforter welcomed the piece of art, known as the *Christa*, that represented the Crucified Christ in female form...that is not a lukewarm thing to do.

It is important to note that all views were respected, and that the piece was placed in such a way that one did not have to see it, being on to the side behind the pulpit. Still, that sort of thing can really upset some people. People who don't go to this church sent messages of disapproval. I can hear them now asking, 'are they drunk; are they crazy?'

From the sayings of the desert Fathers and Mothers, those who went to live in the desert often alone in the 3rd century:

Abba Lot came to Abba Joseph and said: Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and, according as I am able, I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: Why not become fire?²

On her website, *Abby of the Arts, Transformative Living through the contemplative and expressive arts*, Christine Valters Paintner, pairs this story from the Desert Fathers with a quotation from Teilhard de Chardin:

Someday, after we have mastered the winds, the waves and gravity, we shall harness for God energies of love. Then for the second time in the history of the world we will have discovered fire.

Paintner gives us these questions for consideration:
Do I live my life aware of this holy fire within me?
What ignites me with sacred passion for the world?

² <http://abbeyofhearts.com/blog/2006/07/31/becoming-fire/>

What would it mean for me to become fire?³

God's gift of the Holy Spirit, if we are open to it, pray for it, and wait with patience for it, can set us on fire, fueled by God's love for this world.

The Spirit shapes the Church and us.

Jesus, as we hear in John's Gospel, was clear that he had more share but that his friends were not ready for it.

But the Spirit of Truth would come, and guide them into all truth...all in good time...all in God's time.

Think of all that we have learned in 2,000 years about the world.

What will we learn in the next 2,000?

Given what we do know now---

How might the Spirit be empowering us to show forth in our lives what we learn from the life of Christ?

When *have* we known the Spirit, the Holy Comforter?

We have known the Spirit: when we know that we want to help others and also know that we can; when we know that we want to vote and work with the political and societal and Church structures to make them reflect more of what we have learned from Jesus...that everyone matters, everyone is worthy of respect, that all people are equal.

We have known the Spirit when the Spirit helps us the apply what Jesus taught 2,000 years ago to our time, to our circumstances.

The Bible rather than being a rule book of Instructions is a testament to God's love and a testament to the experience and belief that, through the Spirit, truth will continue to be revealed...the ongoing revelation of God, happening now, among us, and in us, through the power of the Spirit. Amen.

³ *Ibid.*