

We gather today with heavy hearts. 100,000 have died of the virus, including our own Sonny Quitlong. People with brown and black skin have suffered at higher rates than those with white skin. There is mourning throughout the country. And now, George Floyd has been murdered, on video, by police officer in Minneapolis. Another person killed because someone did not like the color of his skin. Many people have erupted in anger and frustration. Do we really believe what we just prayed?

We believe in the Spirit, the Spirit who recreates us every day. We believe in the Spirit who binds us together with all who are suffering and with all who are yearning to hear the liberating message of Christ. We believe in the Spirit who frees us from racism, from sexism, from the powerful whose actions speak against the kingdom. We believe in the Spirit who indeed binds all of us together as brothers and sisters.

It is not enough to believe, we must experience *the Spirit*

Today is the great feast of Pentecost, the feast of the Holy Spirit! She is the midwife of change, the sunlight upon us, the rain in our fields, the air we all breathe, the stars that guide us, the winds that move us, the fire in our bellies, the eye of our hearts. She dwells deep within our souls as comfort in our grief, courage to our fears and sharer in our joys. Come Holy Spirit. Please hurry.

The story of Pentecost is one of a powerful wind and tongues of fire that drives the frightened disciples out to proclaim the good news of freedom in Christ for all. Each one gathered in Jerusalem understood them in their own language, their own life experience. Imagine how different those experiences were as they had come from all over the known world-they were women and men, wealthy and hungry, Romans, Greeks, Arabs and of all sorts of religions. How did this work

on that day 2000+ years ago? What made it possible for each one of them to risk sharing and receiving the Spirit ?

We come from many backgrounds and places. The languages of our own life experiences are Spanish, English, Tagalog, Swahili and more. What would it take for me or you to speak aloud of the freedom in God's Spirit? What fear is preventing this, I wondered. So, I read the Book of Acts to discover how *they* did it. It's an amazing story of our church's earliest days. As I read along, a sermon(5/5/2020) by Pope Francis came to mind. He warned that clericalism, rigidity and an attachment to wealth can impede us from the freedom necessary to follow Jesus, to let the Spirit speak. The early church confronted these impediments, faced them and prevailed. But we suffer greatly from them, ignore them and are floundering as a church and nation.

Clericalism denies the universal nature of the Spirit's presence by assuming it is more apparent in some (i.e. ordained, lay ministers, nuns, or especially "holy" people.) and less so in others (ie, people who worship God by another name or not at all or who are very young or old or even just kind of nasty.) But the disciples recognized the Spirit in all people. Imagine how shocked some were when the first gentile convert was a eunuch, a member of a sexual minority barred from the temple. How do we deny the Spirit today in sexual minorities, women, people without a certain education, people whose skin is a different color or religion is not ours?

St Basil wrote in the 3rd century of the universality of the Spirit: *"To the Spirit all creatures turn in their need for sanctification; all living things seek him (sic) according to their ability. His breath empowers each to achieve its own natural end."* In our words: *we believe in the Spirit who binds us together as brothers and sisters*".

Pope Francis warns of rigidity. At every juncture when asked to choose between a religious rule or practice and the universality of the Spirit, they chose the Spirit. Peter, who probably had never tasted pork or shrimp in his life, put aside his religious diet to sit at table with Cornelius. He recognized the Spirit was already present in Cornelius and his family. He risked all the censuring of his religious figures because Peter recognized the Spirit on this gentile. In our experience we see why the Pope is concerned. How has the Spirit been constrained by rigidity in our church: wives being told they must return to an abusive relationship because “marriage is sacred”, children frightened because they ate bread before communion, sexual minorities told they are God’s children but the rules do not allow them to marry? Church leaders are more concerned about who is kneeling or standing or who has the right credentials to receive communion at Mass as signs of unity, rather than acknowledging we are already one in the Spirit. This week, our Washington bishops, boldly rejecting President Trump’s urging to open churches, have shown how to put aside rigid adherence to rules about Mass attendance, in favor of preserving human life. They ultimately recognize that we receive Eucharist through many forms. This is a small but hopeful sign.

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Pope Francis warns against an attachment to wealth. In Acts, all goods were held in common and used to support those in need. It sounds like the work of our wonderful St Vincent de Paul Society. As we at St Marys struggle with our parish financial condition, worsened by the Archbishop’s decision to not allow us to rent our school, I wonder if I or you have become too attached to our wealth- our beautiful church buildings? Where might the Spirit be leading us? What wealth might we leave behind? How would we better serve our neighbors in need if we sold our excess buildings? Imagine how many of our brothers and sisters could be housed

and fed on the proceeds of the church selling all extraneous buildings and giving to those in need.

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How can you and I be more like the early disciples in radically receiving the Holy Spirit? Here are two ideas from the readings and an exercise to try.

In the gospel today, Jesus says “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven and whose sins you retain are retained.” This is a caution to the disciples, and to us. If we are to accept the universal nature of God’s gift of freedom and healing, we must allow the Spirit to forgive us when we sin and to forgive others as well. Jesus understood how hard it would be for someone like Paul to become a disciple if he could not forgive himself for his persecutions. In the whirlwind of action, the disciples hurt one another. Forgiveness was necessary. Otherwise, we all cling to “what we know” and get trapped in fear of the radical change the Spirit is demanding. I wonder, for example, how forgiveness of ourselves, accepting we are racist might allow the Spirit to recreate us and stop the killing? Even when we cannot forgive, we can ask the Holy Spirit to do it for us. It’s a step forward.

In 1 Corinthians we hear “we were all given to drink of one Spirit.” Since the Spirit is what gives us life, we must choose inclusion, understanding and tolerance for we all share this one life. To exclude another is ultimately to exclude ourself. Would a true acceptance that we are one push the research to better understand why the virus is killing some ethnic and racial groups faster than others? Given our history in the US, would a t-shirt with a drinking fountain be a good reminder?

Here is a practice I found helpful. As you enter prayer, put on your mask (we all have at least one). Become aware of your breath as you inhale and exhale. Receive the Holy Spirit in each breath you take. Pray a litany of the fruits of the Spirit, receiving each one: *love, joy, peace, gentleness, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, humility and self control.*

When you are out from your home, on a walk or in the store or at work, and you see another in a mask, say to yourself “ **You and I are drinking from the same Spirit, breathing the same air, we are one.**” And, since wearing a mask is to protect the other person, say “**I thank you for caring for me**”. If you are like me, it would also be helpful to avoid harshly judging those without a mask. Just focus on the gratitude and unity.

If we act in these ways, the words of our St Marys Creed will become an experience of our life and the Spirit will have a better chance of renewing the earth.

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