

Sermon for the Day of Pentecost

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The hardest book I ever tried to read was by one of my seminary professors, Bob Hughes. The book is called *Beloved Dust*. It's a deep dive in the harrowing field of pneumatology. If you don't know what that means, you now have a better sense of just how tough this book is. Pneumatology is the study of the Holy Spirit, and while he tried for an accessible exploration of the field, instead, he just broke people's brains. Bob held a mini course, sort of a book club with seminarians and the internationally renowned author / official brilliant human being. The course started with about twenty of us, and week by week, as the material got progressively more incomprehensible, our numbers dwindled. I have no idea how many finished that book club; my brain fell out somewhere around chapter two-and-a-quarter. I wish I had some great insights from that book, but I don't. I've got a copy if anyone wants to give it a shot, but good luck!

Then again, maybe I did come away with a single insight: I do not understand the Holy Spirit. I can tell you what the catechism says, I can tell you what the more accessible professors taught, but I don't understand it, not really. It's tough to explain something so intangible. It's a whole lot easier to come at the Spirit kinda sideways. My trouble with the Holy Spirit is that I can see the wake rippling across the surface of a lake, but I can't see the boat. I know there was a boat, but I couldn't tell ya the make and model. But that's not nothing. We can look at what's left and work backwards. If there's a wake, something must've caused it. And in our spiritual lives, that something we're trying to make sense of is the Holy Spirit. On the whole, it's a total brain buster, and also, when the Spirit shows up, there's nothing that comes close to feeling so beautifully, wonderfully, terrifyingly cool. The Spirit is supposed to guide the Church, correct it when it goes astray, feed the flames when it's doing right. It bolsters our faith, challenges us to push for more love and more justice. When John Lewis talked about "good trouble," that's the Holy Spirit stirring things up.

One of the main symbols for the Holy Spirit is fire because, while it warms us and we like to think we're in control of it, we're anything but. It roars and burns down what needs burning down. Now, that's all well and good. I like being able to look back and see that yes, the Holy Spirit was here then. But figuring out where the Holy Spirit wants us to go now, where the Spirit wants us to end up, that's a real trick. It's making sense of what's the Spirit's will and what's mine. It's real tempting to say they're the same. I bring this up because we're at a kinda weird, kinda cool place in the life of this Church. Thanks to all the weirdness of the last few years, we've got a rare opportunity. As we baby step our way back into some kind of normalcy, with the fiery wind of the Spirit at our backs, we get to redefine who this church is and what this church stands for.

There was a time when The Episcopal Church was uncomfortably referred to as "the Republican Party at prayer." And just as uncomfortably, The Episcopal Church has also been described as "rife with 'liberal' problems." There's not a lot I can say with certainty about the Holy Spirit, but I feel pretty comfortable saying the Holy Spirit burns for love. It shouldn't be about party affiliation, it should be about love. It should answer the question, "what is loving?" When we look back at this period, I'm guessing the pandemic's gonna look like an institutional forest fire, wildly, uncontrollably destructive, but in time, ashes feeding tiny green shoots pushing back to the light. Actually, I don't wonder. I'm pretty sure that's where we are. We're pushing back through the ash, sticking our little green heads up, refusing to let something like a little ol' global disaster keep us buried. And as we emerge, we choose. We choose God, we choose light, and we choose love.

So what's this look like in practice? Wouldn't you know it, I've got some ideas. First off, we're still living into our sabbath year, becoming that warm place to worry. While we have this time, establish those roots of faith. Catch your breath. Rest. Turn to God, and turn to God, and then turn to God again. We're doing a lot of building work and likely more in the next couple of years. The paint, the walkway, something with the roof, a

step towards better care of Creation with the heating system in the Rectory. That's all gonna help this place stay put for years to come. But there's more. I know this is a big ask for every single one of us, myself included. We've got to set aside our preferred political identities and fill them back in with love. Love your neighbor, love your enemy, seek justice, and defend the oppressed. We can do all those things we need to do, hold people accountable, and still extend that sacred love to everybody. Love is disarming, love is powerful, and love is not easy.

Real, deep Holy Spirit love's going to show up with all its power and we cannot control it. But we can sustain the flames and invite others to share its warmth. Those others, by the way, they're the same kind of others Jesus went to, the ones Jesus invited in. Matthew was a tax collector, if you can imagine, even less popular than tax collectors today. Mary Magdalene was a notorious sinner. Zacheus was just plain mean. Lepers fell at his feet, a hemorrhaging woman clung to his robes, a soldier of the empire begged for his help. Dinner guests ranged from prostitutes to pharisees, friends, family, and foes. At any given moment, anyone could point at Jesus and say he kept bad company. And by their standards, they'd be right. But by God's standard, everyone he hung out with was the right kind of person, because they were all persons. The human, the beautiful creation of God, loved no matter who they were or what they did. Love broke through where nothing else could.

I can think of no better model for our church. Find the ones society says are unlovable, all of them, and invite them in. If I could fill these pews with a hundred trans kids, I'd do it in a heartbeat. If I could fill these pews with a hundred red-hat wearing, mean flag flyers, I'd do it. If I could fill these pews, I'd fill 'em with love. And that's gonna look a lot like us and a lot different, too. It's gonna look like migrant workers, professors, and gas station attendants. It's gonna look like cops, doctors, anti-racists, wealthy red voters, poor blue voters. It's gonna look like folks with skylights in the ceiling and folks with holes in the roof. It's gonna look like town *and* gown, village and county, walkers and commuters. It's gonna look like lawyers, defendants, felons, spotless driving records, too much cologne, not enough deodorant, mean folks, kind folks, disregarded introverts, overly eager extroverts, good singers, and caterwaulers. It's gonna look like a whole cross-section of every category of person our society made up crammed in and delighting in sitting next to a neighbor the world says they should hate, every last one of 'em wrapped in love for this place, love for each other, and love for God.

It's an absolutely impossible ask, and that's exactly why it's where the Spirit burns in this place. I mean, maybe I'm getting my druthers mixed up with God's again, but I think our Presiding Bishop is onto something when he says, "If it's not about love, it's not about God." The Holy Spirit burns incomprehensible and all-embracing, still. St. Thomas', we're absolutely smoldering, and all it's gonna take is a little fanning for that holy conflagration to roar back. We fan that flame not with worry or fear or disappointment. We fan that flame with love. Love for this place, love for each other, and love for God.