

Homily for Sunday, May 28, 2023



The feast of Pentecost is part of our Judeo-Christian heritage. It was a Jewish festival long before it was celebrated as a Christian feast. For our Jewish ancestors in faith, Pentecost was called the Festival of Weeks. It was a week (7 days) of weeks (7 days) plus one day, totaling 50 days. In the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) Pentecost was celebrated 50 days after the great Feast of Passover. It was a festival celebrating the first harvest of grain. With the harvest in mind, you can see why Christians borrowed and reinterpreted Pentecost as a birthing, as a bringing forth of new life, as a thanksgiving for what God had provided. For that reason, we traditionally say that Pentecost is the birthday of the Church. I see it as a birthing in

another sense. The disciples emerged from the enclosure of the upper room, a room that was locked, and were born anew into a much larger world. They went from a world of confinement and fear to a world of courage stretching to the four corners of the world.

This was, perhaps, the greatest transformation in the Church's history. How was it possible? Let's look at the Scriptures to see how this transformation happened in them and how it might happen in us.

The first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, tells us how Jews from all over the known world gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost. When the Spirit filled the room where the disciples were gathered, they were immediately filled with courage and were able to speak in the language of all the people who had gathered. The Parthians, the Medes, the Phrygians, etc. wondered how these country bumpkins from Galilee knew how to speak all these languages. These foreigners, these visitors to Jerusalem, heard the disciples speaking all these various languages and they understood them. Pope Francis, in comparison to a number of past popes, doesn't speak that many languages, yet he is heard and understood by so many. Maybe the Spirit of Love speaks the universal language of love, and that language needs little interpretation and even less translation. So, the Pentecost story we get from the Acts of the Apostles is a story about *hearing* and *understanding*.

In the Gospel story, the Risen Lord appears seemingly out of nowhere to his disciples in the upper room. He says, "**Peace be with you,**" twice and breathes upon them with the words, "**Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven.**" If the Acts of the Apostles story is a story about *hearing and understanding*, then the gospel story is a story about *peace and forgiveness*. When you stop and think about it, in purely human terms, peace and forgiveness rarely occur without hearing and understanding. When I take the time to really *hear* and make an effort to *understand* another person, I'm more likely to be at *peace* with that person and much more likely to *forgive* them, if forgiveness is needed. One of the reasons I think we have difficulty in the world of hearing, understanding, forgiving, and being peacemakers is because we tend not to see differences as gifts of the Holy Spirit.

St. Paul didn't always see differences as gifts of the Holy Spirit. He started off as an ultra-conservative Jew, a model Pharisee. If you didn't fit into a certain box, Paul was the first to persecute you. He admits as much himself. Yet, a transformation, a kind of Pentecost, happened to him. He went from persecuting people to saying just the opposite, ***"There are a variety of services and a variety of gifts, but it's the same Lord working in all of us. We are not separate; we are all baptized into the one body, and we all drink of the one Spirit."***

Pentecost is a story of shut and opened doors. The disciples were hiding in fear behind closed doors which, at least, gave them some sense of safety from rest of the hostile world. Oblivious to sealed tombs and locked doors, the Risen Lord bursts into their presence. They thought it was all over between them and Jesus. After all, their conduct over the past few days had been disastrous: denials, betrayals, leaving Jesus to go it alone, to die alone. Who would want to associate with a bunch like that? It would be better if things just cooled off, and they could just slink away into oblivion and be forgotten. Yet, Jesus seeks them out, not for a scolding, but to mission them to be his representatives in the world. He speaks of forgiveness and of second chances. The Spirit of Second Chances would help them overcome their shame, break down doors, and fill them with courage to preach the Good News of God's love.

A forty-one-year-old man named Tom was dying of AIDS. His parents were in total denial. Although they brought him basic necessities like food and water, for the most part, his parents had Tom locked up in an upstairs bedroom in their home. He admitted that he had preferred closed doors to protect himself.

A priest went to visit Tom, who had lost so much weight that he looked lost in his king-sized bed. The priest hugged Tom, held his hand and said to him, "Now tell me what you want me to know." Tom's eyes were filled with tears, and he said, "No one touches me anymore," and then he began to unravel his story.

Eventually Tom had to be hospitalized, and each day the priest went to visit him. This priest also had no luck in bridging the gap between Tom and his parents, although he was successful with Tom's brother and sister-in-law. After five weeks in hospital, Tom became weaker and weaker, yet he entrusted the priest with other pieces of his story. He trusted the priest and even found things to laugh about. Tom's greatest anxiety came from the fact that he felt he was a failure. Although everyone who knew him described him as generous, kind, thoughtful and attentive to others, Tom focused on the "mistake" he had made. He shared how embarrassed he was and how he thought others would think of him. The priest never asked nor found out how Tom got AIDS.

Over time, Tom pushed people away, never returned their phone calls, and lived in a world of increasing loneliness. One day Tom asked the priest to contact his friend Anna whom he hadn't seen for over two years. Too ashamed, he never told her about his condition. The priest made the arrangements for Anna to come visit Tom in the hospital. When Anna asked why he didn't tell her what was going on, Tom replied that he was too embarrassed. The two friends embraced and were reunited. Tears flowed.

In one of Tom's last conversations with his brother, he told him that he had AIDS and hoped his brother could still love him. His brother replied, "I don't care what you have, I love you." In time, Tom's father just couldn't hold out any longer and he, too, repaired the rift with his son. At the wake, the father said

to the priest, "You know, I always wanted a perfect son. For a while I thought he was a failure. But these last few weeks visiting him in the hospital I started to learn who my son was again. He wasn't a failure. I loved him so much. He was a good boy. I am proud of my son." Tom died imperfect, but knowing his father accepted and loved him.

The upper room in Jerusalem was also characterized by failure, shame, isolation, and locked doors. One by one, those doors opened as the Spirit exhaled its love. In the person of the priest, the brother, the friend Anna, and eventually the father, they all, accompanied with Jesus, crossed the threshold into that locked room and breathed on Tom, "Tom, receive the Holy Spirit. Your sins are forgiven. Be at peace."

Today is the Church's birthday. We are the Body of Christ, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people set apart sent to open shut doors.

Fr. Phil