

*Day of Pentecost*

June 4, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Sam Wolff

The Holy Gospel according to Saint John. (John 7: 37-39)

On the last day of the festival [of Booths], the great day, while Jesus was standing [in the temple], he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Every year I look forward to the Sunday of Pentecost. It gives all of us a time to reflect on God's Spirit. It gives me an opportunity to talk about God's Spirit.

And there is a beautiful word in Swahili, and literally it's translated "welcome." The word is "*karibu*." But it means a lot more than "welcome." The root of that word is "near." And so when you say "*karibu*," in Swahili, you say more than "welcome." You are saying, "Come. Come near to me. For this time we are together. Be a part of who I am. Let us share who we are."

I think that "*karibu*" is a wonderful word for the Holy Spirit, this part of God that comes to us and welcomes us to some kind of seemingly unknowable God. Jesus said, "*I will send to you from the Father the Spirit*." And then Jesus tells us that the Spirit is for renewal and resurrection, healing and hope. In short, it is the Holy Spirit that is our connector to Almighty God. And it is she that whispers "*karibu*" to all of us.

I always think of the Holy Spirit in feminine terms, that part of God that is something wonderful; a touch of a mother. I can think back to the Creation, and back to the Creation story. You know, God looked out. There was nothing there; just this mass void of all the boiling, angry waters, and atoms, and whatever. And it's just there. Then, the Bible says, "*Then the Spirit of God descended upon the waters and they were calmed*." And I can just see that picture of this beautiful feminine spirit, this soothing of the waters. And once she did that, then God Almighty could say, "*Let there be light*."

In Psalm 51, one of the psalms of David, we hear this cry for nearness to God, when David pens, "*Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy spirit from me*." This is an amazing psalm, I think, for Pentecost. But it's an amazing psalm anyway, because David penned these words at the absolute lowest point of his life. David's life was a mess. He had just been found out by God, and God sent God's prophet Nathan to deliver the devastating news that, "Hey, you know, God knows that you're an adulterer and a murderer." And David was forced to face the enormity of his sin.

David, if you remember the story, had broken every rule. He was a victim of his own greed and lust and foolishness. His life was in shambles. His family, his marriage, everything had been torn apart, everything shattered. And this mighty king was reduced to nothing. And it is out of that, out of the depths of his despair, his utter human frailty, that he cries and he pleads, and falls on his knees, *“Cast me not away from thy presence. O God, take not your Holy Spirit from me.”*

It’s almost like he’s saying, “God, I deserve it. Do anything, but don’t take your Spirit from me,” because David fully understood his isolation and that awful separation from God. And yet David knew that God’s presence was dependant upon being connected by the Holy Spirit. So he cries out, “Don’t take that away from me, God!”

I wonder if Saint Paul was reflecting on this story when he wrote in Romans:

*“Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes [for us] with sighs too deep for words.”*

When we really think about this, and think about what it means, it means that through the Spirit, no matter what, we are always connected to our God. It means that those times when we feel like David, we’re so far, we feel so distant, so removed from God’s presence. You know, on those days that we’ve just sunk to our lowest, when we’re ashamed of things we’ve done, when all these things in the world spin around, and there are out of our control, they beat us down, we feel so helpless. It’s at those dark moments, those exact moments, that God’s Spirit intercedes for us, with sighs too deep for words, and connects me back to my God.

There is no better example of this than the story we just heard of the first Pentecost, the time that we saw the disciples, right before you read this morning. They had been locked behind closed doors. They were mentally and spiritually paralyzed. They were anxious, they were fearful. They could do nothing. In short, they were separated from God. And then something happened. Then Jesus sent the Spirit, and the Spirit interceded for them with sighs too deep for words. And now these men just changed. These plain, ordinary people, whose lives had been senseless and meaningless just the day before, came boldly out, and they could speak in languages that everyone could understand. And it was on that day that our beloved church, the church of Jesus Christ, was born.

The disciples were not ordained. For the most part, they probably were not highly educated. Some of them even could have been illiterate. But through the power of the Holy Spirit, they were connected to God. And with this power, they could go out and change the world.

This is a beautiful story. And we need to keep telling this story in words and in deeds. And I think we need to tell the Pentecost story primarily in deeds, because the

Spirit cannot be seen. And the Spirit — believe me, I've tried in confirmation class — it's impossible to describe. And so the only way we can really share this gift of the Spirit is show the Holy Spirit by the way we live. People have to see, they have to see her in us, in the way we live, and in the way we, as Christians, make a difference in the lives of others.

The Pentecost story is also a story about all people, and so we have to open our lives and share with all people. I'm sure the disciples looked out that day, they saw a lot of people that were different than they were, a lot of people they didn't know. They probably saw people they didn't like. And yet the Spirit was sent to all. It is this kind of Spirit of God that we need to live.

There is really only one way: that we follow in the footsteps of Christ and live lives of faith. Follow the example of being generous, gentle, and forgiving. Welcoming all people. Putting aside our own selfish interests for the sake of others. Live faithful lives, by really forgiving as we have been forgiven, and really loving as we have been loved.

To open our lives and welcome the Spirit, as each day she whispers to us, "*karibu.*"

Amen.