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Good Shepherd

Pentecost, May 31, 2009

RCL, Year B: Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; Rom. 8:22-27; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

The one thing you can say with assurance about the Holy Spirit is that, whatever you say, you'll be at least partly wrong. She always evades being pinned down. That's the very essence of being the Spirit.

And, as you can well imagine, this is very frustrating for preachers, for people who want to think deeply about God, for people who take their religion seriously. That would be all or most of us here. And if you didn't hear yourself described in that list, don't think that lets you off the hook. It's just the you have a different problem.

The problem of the pious is that we can't get the Spirit to stay put in here with us, to remember her church manners, to stop hobnobbing with strangers. The problem for everybody, pious or not, is that you can't rely on keeping her out of your life. She infiltrates, she insinuates, she sticks her foot in the door. She's not above blowing in a window. She may set off a firecracker under your easy chair—with you in it. What else might she do? You never know.

Our readings today wisely avoid trying to pin the Spirit down. But they do give a few pointers as to where one might look to find her at work.

The story from Acts tells about a moment of ecstasy that emerged quite unexpectedly from a time of loss and mourning and distress. Suddenly, Jesus' forlorn abandoned followers find a new strength and a new confidence in God and new hope.

And the Spirit does another thing in that story, too. She makes communication possible. People who would never have listened to those ignorant Galileans before find themselves listening and understanding and being profoundly moved. The disciples, for their

part, find they have something to say to people they wouldn't have known how to talk to otherwise and they're ready to say it.

But it's not as if the Spirit hadn't been there already with Jesus' followers as they mourned his death, struggled to comprehend his resurrection, and mourned again over his departure on Ascension Day. The Spirit was with them already, even if they didn't know it.

As Paul told us in our reading from Romans, the Spirit is present in the groaning of the world itself as it longs to be delivered from the burdens placed on it by human sin and carelessness. She's present with us when we are grieving over the disconnects in our lives, over our failure to live up to God's gifts, and over our uncertainties about the future. The Spirit is God joining us in our grief and uncertainty and sharing them and taking them into God's own life so that our life becomes God's life, too. The Spirit can mourn with us as well as rejoice with us, suffer with us as well as give us new life.

And, in our reading from John's Gospel, we heard Jesus speak of the Spirit as the Paraclete, the Advocate, the Comforter, the one who comes to sustain us after Jesus' departure. And Jesus calls this Paraclete "the Spirit of truth" because the Spirit is afraid of nothing. The Spirit isn't threatened by the realities of life, however harsh they may get. The Spirit isn't threatened by truth, no matter how difficult it may be to accept. The Spirit knows that the power of God is undefeated and that we are nowhere near exhausting God's resources.

Christians often try to get the Spirit in a cage. Our catholic heritage has sometimes wanted to cage her in the sacraments and then duly measure out your dose of her through the church. Our protestant heritage has sometimes tried to trap her in the Bible and make sure she never says anything surprising again. Pentecostals and charismatics have sometimes decided she should just confine herself to causing ecstasy, preferably on a regular and predictable schedule.

Liberal Christians have sometimes tried to make her speak logically and focus more on predictable things like ethics.

She doesn't go for any of that. The story of God and humanity isn't over yet. Neither is the story of the church. Neither is your story or my story. And if you think you know what she'll do next, you're probably wrong at least in part.

Maybe the most important places to look for her in our time are when we find the gift of communication happening, as with those people we read about in Acts, and when we find the gift of facing up to truth, even when it seems a bit intimidating at first. You can be pretty sure the Spirit is involved there in some way or other.

Today is the Feast of Pentecost. What does it mean if I wish you a Happy Feast of Pentecost? I am wishing you the intimate companionship of God through thick and thin, through grief and ecstasy, through trials and fulfillment—and a lot of surprises along the way.