

There is in the original setting of this Gospel as well as in the modern world a concern for the oneness of the church. It clearly lies in something beyond doctrinal agreement and institutional relatedness (neither of which is unimportant)—in their experienced love of the Father that keeps believers together in spite of their multiple differences and links them with disciples past and future.

PENTECOST

The lessons for the Day of Pentecost virtually force the preacher to consider and address a subject that we often prefer to avoid—the Spirit of God. As the commentary this week on Rom. 8:14–17 suggests, the goal should not be to explain the Spirit. The very nature of the Spirit defies our attempts to explain or control. A further complexity is that different biblical texts offer different perspectives on the Spirit; there are, however, some common affirmations we can make without pretending to exhaust the mystery of the Spirit.

The Spirit gives life! In the account of the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit gives new life to a dispirited band of disciples. The church is born. Birth imagery is present too in Rom. 8 where “all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (v. 14). Our very lives derive from and depend on God, whom we properly address as “Abba! Father!” (v. 15; see “life”/“live” in vs. 6, 10, 11, 12, 13). In John, it is the Spirit or Advocate whose presence will continue to make life possible for the disciples in the absence of Jesus’ physical presence. These New Testament views of the Spirit are congruent with that of Ps. 104. Here it is not just God’s people who are enlivened by the Spirit. Rather, the Spirit of God is responsible for the origin and sustenance of all creation (Ps. 104:27–30; see Gen. 1:2).

The life-giving power and presence of the Spirit is a gift—unsolicited, unexpected, undeserved. The exuberant account in Acts 2 makes it clear that the gift of the Spirit shatters all reasonable expectations. Only God could be responsible for such marvels. In John, it is stated repeatedly that the Spirit is given or sent, either by the Father (John 14:16, 26) or by Jesus himself (15:26; 16:7). The people of God and the whole creation live by grace.

To be sure, not everyone will acknowledge God’s grace. To live by the Spirit is to live in some sense at odds with “the world” (John 14:17); the sneers from the crowd in Acts 2:13, the presence of “the

wicked" in Ps. 104:35, and Paul's mention of suffering in Rom. 8:17 serve to instruct us that life in the Spirit will mean opposition. But life in the Spirit is life as God intends. It is to know a peace that the world cannot give (John 14:27). In our world that so desperately seeks peace in self-help and the ability to manipulate and control, it is crucial that we wrestle with these texts and their claim. In a world devoid of wonder, they may begin to open us to experience the presence of mystery and the mystery of Presence.

Acts 2:1-21

(A B C)

New life—sudden, unmerited, irresistible new life! That is the reality the Pentecost narrative in Acts 2 broadcasts, and the text transmits the story in the most expansive way imaginable. All the stops on this great literary organ are employed: a heavenly sound like a rushing wind, descending fire, patterns of transformed speech, and the like. It is as if not even the most lavish use of human language is capable of capturing the experiences of the day, and that is undoubtedly one of the emotions the text wishes to convey.

It is not accidental, of course, that the birth of the church, this great "harvest" of souls, should occur on this important festival. The Feast of Pentecost, or Weeks, as it is known in the Old Testament, marked the end of the celebration of the spring harvest, a liturgical cycle that began at Passover and during which devout Israelite families praised God for God's grace and bounty. It also was the beginning of a period, lasting until the autumnal Festival of Booths (or Tabernacles), in which the firstfruits of the field were sacrificed to Yahweh. And among at least some Jews the Feast of Weeks was a time of covenant renewal, as the following text from the Book of Jubilees (c. 150 B.C.) makes clear:

Therefore, it is ordained and written in the heavenly tablets that they should observe the feast of Shebuot (Weeks) in this month, once per year, in order to renew the covenant in all (respects), year by year. (*Jub.* 1:17; trans. O. S. Wintermute in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1985, vol. 2, p. 67)

Pentecost/Weeks is thus a pregnant moment in the life of the people of God and in the relationship between that people and God. Or to put the matter more graphically, but also more accurately, Pentecost is the moment when gestation ceases and birthing occurs.

Thus, it is both an end and a beginning, the leaving behind of that which is past, the launching forth into that which is only now beginning to be. Pentecost therefore is not a time of completion. It is moving forward into new dimensions of being, whose basic forms are clear, but whose fulfillment has yet to be realized.

Those who follow the cycle of lectionary texts (or, for that matter, those who simply read the book of Acts) have been prepared for this moment. Twice, in connection with Jesus' ascension, the coming of the Spirit has been promised: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (Acts 1:8; compare 1:5). That promise is now realized in a manner far surpassing the expectations of even the most faithful disciples. New life for the church! New life for individuals within the church! New life through the Spirit of God! That is the meaning of Pentecost.

No one present is excluded from this display of God's grace. Unlike other important moments in the history of God's mighty acts of salvation—the transfiguration (Mark 9:2-13), for example, where only the inner few are witnesses to the work of God's Spirit—everyone is included at Pentecost. The tongues of fire rest upon "each" (Acts 2:3) of the disciples, and a moment later the crowd comes surging forward because "each one" (v. 6) has heard the disciples speaking in his or her native tongue. In order that not even the least astute reader may miss the inclusiveness of the moment, the list of place names that begins in v. 9 traces a wide sweep through the world of the Greco-Roman Diaspora. That which happens at Pentecost is thus no inner mystical experience, but an outpouring of God's energy that touches every life present.

Yet not everyone responded to the winds and fires of new life, at least not in positive ways. Some mocked (v. 13) and, in their unwillingness to believe the freshness of God's initiatives, reacted with stale words (compare 1 Sam. 1:14) as they confused Spirit-induced joy with alcohol-induced inebriation. Perhaps it was the very extravagant expression of the Spirit's presence that drove them to conclude: "This cannot be what it seems to be!" Yet what it seemed to be is precisely what it was. God's Spirit unleashed! New life—sudden, unmerited, irresistible new life! We may hope that those who mocked were among those who, on hearing Peter's sermon, were "cut to the heart" (v. 37).

Peter's sermon begins—and this day's lection ends—with a quotation (vs. 17-21) from the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28-32a), and nothing could be more symptomatic of the nature of Pentecost than the transmutation of this text. That which in the prophet's discourse appears prominently as a forecast of destruction and death has

become on Peter's tongue a declaration of new life. For Joel the signs of the outpouring of the Spirit are a prelude to disaster (see especially Joel 2:32b, c), but for Peter these wonders have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, himself the greatest of God's wonders (Acts 2:22), and their purpose, *Christ's* purpose, is nothing less than the redemption of humankind. Again the Spirit has invaded human life in ways that shatter old expectations. It is not death that is the aim of the Spirit's visitation, but new life—sudden, unmerited, irresistible new life! "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (v. 21).

Psalm 104:24–34, 35b

(A B C)

Psalm 104 has been called "one of the crown jewels of the Psalter" (H. Darrell Lance, "Psalm 104:24–34," *No Other Foundation* 7 [winter 1986]: 42). Along with Ps. 103, to which it is bound by the repetition of "Bless the LORD, O my soul" (103:1, 22; 104:1, 35), Ps. 104 provides eloquent testimony to the inseparable unity of God's saving and creating work on behalf of humanity and of the entire universe. Unique in its sustained attention to creation (see also Pss. 8; 19:1–6; Gen. 1:1–2:4), Ps. 104 is a song of praise which can be divided as follows:

- vs. 1–4 God and the heavens
- vs. 5–13 God and the earth (note "earth" in vs. 5, 13)
- vs. 14–23 God and people (note "people" in vs. 14, 23)
- vs. 24–30 "all" (vs. 24, 27) God's works and creatures
- vs. 31–35 conclusion: divine joy (v. 31) and human joy (v. 34)

The lection consists of the final two sections, which do serve to emphasize what has been clear all along: God rules the universe! As H.-J. Kraus puts it, "The conception of the heavenly king stands behind the whole psalm" (*Psalms 60–150*, trans. H. C. Oswald; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989, p. 304).

(Also see Last Sunday After Epiphany regarding Ps. 99, the Seventh Sunday of Easter regarding Ps. 97, and Proper 4 regarding Ps. 96.)

The opening and closing invitation is unique to Pss. 103–104. The word "bless" seems to have meant originally "to bend the knee." Thus, to bless the Lord is an act of homage in recognition of God's rule. The phrase "my soul" could also be translated "my whole self." It is an especially appropriate invitation for a psalm that

affirms that all life derives from God, is sustained by God, and finds its destiny in God (see Ps. 104:14–15, 27–30, 33–34).

Verse 24 is a sort of summary exclamation that looks back over vs. 1–23. It contains two of the six occurrences of the key word 'sh, "do, make" (see "make"/"made" in vs. 4, 19, 24; "work(s)" in vs. 13, 24, 31). *Everything* derives from God. The heavens, the earth, animals, and people—God "made them all" (to quote Cecil Frances Alexander's hymn "All Things Bright and Beautiful"); and the whole creation is a witness to God's wisdom (see Prov. 3:19; 8:22–31; Jer. 10:12; Rom. 1:20). This verse expresses the same evaluation of creation that is expressed in Gen. 1 by the affirmation, "It was good."

In Ps. 104:25, not coincidentally perhaps, the sea is called "great" just as the Lord was called "great" in v. 1. In Canaanite religion, the sea was considered a god that represented chaos and that was defeated by Baal. Psalm 104 has already suggested that God has ordered the chaotic waters into life-giving springs and rivers (vs. 6–13). As vs. 25–26 suggest, even the mighty and mysterious oceans are subject to God (see Ps. 29:10; Isa. 51:9–10). The most fearsome creature of the sea, Leviathan—a version of the chaos monster known in other sources—is here but a mere creature, and a harmless one at that (see Job 41:1–11; Ps. 74:12–14).

The "all" in Ps. 104:27 apparently refers to more than just the sea creatures mentioned in vs. 25–26; it recalls the "all" of v. 24. Every creature, human and otherwise, depends on God for life. God's "hand" continually feeds them; all creatures gather food as Israel gathered manna in the wilderness (see Ex. 16:16). God's "breath" or "spirit" (Ps. 104:29–30; the Hebrew word is *rūah* in each case) keeps all creatures alive (see Job 34:14–15). Psalm 104:29 and 30 suggest a continuing creation empowered by God's Spirit. God's "face" or presence serves to "renew the face of the ground" (emphasis added). Because God rules the world, new things are always possible. The life-giving and life-renewing power of God's breath/Spirit is an appropriate theme for the Day of Pentecost, which celebrates the gift of God's Spirit, who gave new life to a discouraged and dispirited band of disciples (Acts 2), who then went about "turning the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). Like all God's creations, the church lives by the power of God's Spirit, not by its own ability, merit, or ingenuity.

Just as Ps. 8 affirms that the majesty of God *includes* the earth and its creatures (Ps. 8:1, 9), so Ps. 104 suggests that God's "glory" is all bound up with the "works" in which God rejoices. Elsewhere, "glory" is associated with God's sovereign rule (see Pss. 24:7–10;

29:1-3, 9-11; 145:1, 5, 12; Isa. 6:1-5). The appropriate response to God's rule and God's rejoicing in God's works is praise. Praise is the recognition that God—not humans—rules the world (see Ps. 100:3); and praise involves the yielding of the whole self to God in liturgy and in life (Ps. 104:33-34). Verse 35 begins by recognizing the reality that not all humans submit themselves to God's rule, and it concludes with the psalmist's reaffirmation of allegiance to God's rule.

In an increasingly secular, human-centered world that is dominated by the conviction that "nature" exists to serve people, Ps. 104 offers a vitally different view of the world—a thoroughly God-centered view. "Nature" is not God, but neither does it exist apart from God's creative and sustaining breath/Spirit. Everything we humans do has an effect on God's world and thus on God. Ultimately, ecology, economy, and theology are inseparable. Life belongs to God. Human fulfillment consists not of self-actualization, but rather begins with the simple invitation: "Bless the LORD, O my soul."

Romans 8:14-17

Perhaps nowhere in the New Testament does the human need to explain, and therefore to establish a sense of control, falter more convincingly than when it encounters references to the Spirit. As the notes in the NRSV indicate, we sometimes do not even know whether the word refers to the wind, to God's Spirit, or to a human or some other spirit (thus confusion over whether the English word should appear in uppercase or lowercase). The early church's dealings with the Spirit prove extremely difficult to understand (for example, the baptism of the Spirit in Acts). What we repeatedly fail to acknowledge is that the desire to explain is antithetical to the Spirit itself, precisely because the Spirit does blow where the Spirit wills and not where exegetes and preachers might like. The celebration of Pentecost ought to remind us of that important fact.

Even in Rom. 8, in the middle of the letter so often understood to be Paul's most mature and refined theological statement, a clear grasp of the notion of the Spirit eludes us. Instead, Paul refers to the Spirit's work with a variety of expressions. The "law of the Spirit of life" sets believers free (8:2); believers then live "according to the Spirit" and have their minds set "on the things of the Spirit" (vs. 4-6). The Spirit lives in believers (v. 9) and is life itself (v. 10). Through the Spirit believers "put to death the deeds of the body" and cry to God as Father (vs. 13-16). The Spirit intercedes for humankind and is known by God (vs. 26-27). Not only do these

varying expressions frustrate logical explanation; but they also demonstrate that Ernst Käsemann was surely right to observe that, when it comes to talk about the Spirit, "Paul was not so timid as his expositors" (*Commentary on Romans*; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980, p. 226).

The lesson assigned for this Sunday opens with the assertion: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (v. 14). As often in Paul, the "for" connects this statement with the preceding verse, but does it refer to all of the verse, so that the statement highlights the exclusion of some? Or, on the other hand, does the "for" refer to the second half of the verse, so that v. 14 simply amplifies what it means to live "by the Spirit"? The Greek does not allow for a precise decision of this question, but the tenor of the passage as a whole suggests that the "for" refers to the second half of v. 13. That is, "all who . . ." is a positive statement about those who are led by the Spirit, not an attempt to restrict the number or to define out certain other people.

Verses 15-17 serve to explain what it means to be "children of God." A child does not have a "spirit of slavery," but a "spirit of adoption." Whether Paul imagines an actual state that can be characterized as a "spirit of slavery," or whether this is a rhetorical expression to contrast sharply with a "spirit of adoption," is unclear. The contrast itself would have great currency in a world so dominated by the slave system as was the Greco-Roman world of the first century.

The "spirit of adoption" that results from being children of God yields certain specific results. God's children freely cry to him as "Father" (v. 15). They are both God's children and, thereby, "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (v. 17). Paul's language escalates as he struggles to depict what it means to be "led by the Spirit."

In the closing phrase of the passage, the NRSV lends itself to a misimpression. We are heirs with Christ, the NRSV reads, "if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (v. 17). The word *eiper*, here translated "if, in fact" does sometimes have the connotation of "if" or "if indeed," as in 1 Cor. 15:15 ("if it is true"). It may also be translated as "since," as it is in Rom. 3:30 ("since God is one") and 8:9 ("since the Spirit of God dwells in you"), where there is no question about something having happened. Here, where following verses make it quite clear that Paul knows that believers are suffering as they await the concluding stages of God's triumph, there is no question whether believers are suffering. The point is that they are, and that their suffering is actually a suffering "with" Christ.

This small point of translation touches on a much larger issue, of course. With the universal human anxiety about safety and security, readers of this passage may find themselves asking *whether* they are among the "children of God" in 8:14 and *whether* they indeed are suffering with Christ. The focal point of the reading then becomes essentially anthropological: "Am I among those who are led by the Spirit?"

For Paul, by contrast, the focal point is not anthropological but christological and pneumatological. He is not concerned to predict or decide or verify who is within the circle and who is outside the circle. Rather, he struggles to articulate the gracious, unmerited, sustaining work of the Spirit in human lives. For him, the Spirit is a sign of the new age that is breaking in and that cannot be overturned (vs. 31-39).

(For further commentary, particularly on the phrase "children of God," see the discussion of Rom. 8:12-17 for Trinity Sunday, Year B.)

John 14:8-17 (25-27)

The liturgical calendar during this season is organized according to the sequence of events in the two New Testament books of Luke and Acts. Thus Good Friday, Easter, several Sundays in the Easter season, Ascension, and Pentecost follow one another in an orderly fashion. The fact that the term "Pentecost" is used at all and that Acts 2 is a suggested reading for each of the years of the lectionary cycle indicates the dependency on the schema of Luke-Acts.

The primary theme for this Sunday—the Holy Spirit—is, however, treated differently in other New Testament writings, less dramatically perhaps than the mysterious happenings of Acts 2, but no less profoundly. "Gospel of the Spirit," a label often put on John, is symptomatic of an extensive consideration of the Spirit in that Gospel, and particularly as a topic of Jesus' teaching throughout his ministry. "Pentecost" happens not after a period of fifty days after Easter, but on Easter evening. John helps us to think of the Spirit in ways other than sheer excitement or emotional agitation.

In John, especially instructive are the five passages found in the farewell discourses where the terms "Advocate" and "Spirit of truth" are used, and where Jesus anticipates the coming of the Spirit immediately following his departure (John 14:16-17, 25-26; 15:26-27; 16:7-11, 13-15). Two of those passages are included in the Gospel lesson for today, and another is recommended for next Sunday (Trinity Sunday).

Four features of the Spirit stand out in the selection from John 14. First is the term *paraklētos*, rendered by the NRSV as "Advocate." This represents a perhaps unfortunate change from the RSV "Counselor," since "Advocate" highlights the legal overtones of the term (as in 1 John 2:1), prominent only in John 16:7-11. The text itself defines *paraklētos* by adding "to be with you forever" (14:16). The Spirit as *paraklētos* is God's powerful and nurturing presence, given to the disciples in the wake of Jesus' departure.

Specifically, the disciples are faced with Jesus' words, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (14:15). How are they to live in such a way that their affection for Jesus does not degenerate into sentimentality, but expresses itself in concrete deeds of mercy and in faithful obedience? Without his physical presence, how are they to cope with the forces arraigned against them, and not regress to what they were before he entered their lives? The answer is the Counselor, whose sustaining influence has no termination.

Second, we encounter in 14:17 the term "Spirit of truth," which recurs later in 15:26 and 16:13. The Spirit teaches. The Spirit enables the community to remember its link with Jesus.

The phrase is a promise that embodies both a threat and a hope. On the one hand, the Spirit will keep the church's feet to the fire when it wanders into accommodating paths in search of an easier way. The "Spirit of truth" (emphasis added) forces a reality check, prodding, needling, cajoling the community to embrace its distinctiveness as the people of God. The Spirit does not make things easier, only harder. On the other hand, the words Jesus taught contain commitments about resurrection, life, a secure dwelling place, a meaningful present, and a hopeful tomorrow. The Spirit prevents the church from forgetting that it has a future and helps it translate the message of Jesus so that the future is not simply endless time but rich with promise.

Third, the Spirit is sent by the Father—a divine gift. Twice in these five passages in John, the Father is specified as the sender (14:16, 26), and twice Jesus is the sender (15:26; 16:7). The stress is not coincidental. All the stratagems in the world cannot entice or force the Spirit's hand. No manipulation of a group, no set form of prayer, no upstretched hands. The promise to the church of God's presence always remains at God's initiative, and yet it is a promise of *God*, and one on which the church can rely.

Finally, the Spirit distinguishes the disciples from the world. The church becomes a peculiar community, set apart by being indwelt by the Spirit. That carries some interesting implications. For one thing, the church cannot take its cues for its life and mission from the

culture, as if the culture posed all the right questions. As the text puts it, "the world cannot receive" the Spirit, "because it neither sees him nor knows him" (14:17). Without taking a superior stance toward the world (after all, the Spirit is a gift), the church follows a script that seems to the world no more than an impossible jumble of letters.

For another thing, the peace that the church seeks and receives is distinctive (14:27). All those "peaceful" scenes thrust at us by Madison Avenue, enticing as they may be, turn out to be mirages, false promises that haunt us in the seeking. The peace given the church is nothing other than the promise of the divine presence, the assurance of people not orphaned and destitute.

The Gospel of John confronts us with sobering and penetrating words for Pentecost.

TRINITY SUNDAY

The lessons for Trinity Sunday offer an additional opportunity to consider the work of the Holy Spirit. For instance, Rom. 5:1-5 makes reference to God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Paul obviously does not have a detailed doctrine of the Trinity, but the three "Persons" are present, and it is through their mutual work that the believer experiences peace. In particular, it is through the Holy Spirit that the love of God "has been poured into our hearts" (Rom. 5:5). As the lessons for last week also suggested, this peace does not preclude suffering.

The lesson from John is another passage in Jesus' "farewell discourse" that mentions the Spirit. The Spirit's role in this case is teacher. The Spirit "will guide you into all the truth," including "things that are to come" (16:13). An exploration of this remarkable claim will involve the preacher in a consideration of the relationship between the Spirit and Jesus. What the Spirit teaches will be in continuity with what Jesus has already made known (vs. 14-15).

Even the lesson from Prov. 8 may be pursued in a direction appropriate to Trinity Sunday. It is likely that the figure of personified Wisdom lies behind the Logos Christology of John 1. Thus, the text opens the way to consider the feminine dimension of the Godhead.

The mention of "glory" in Ps. 8:5 and Rom. 5:2 offers another possible theme for preaching. The juxtaposition of Pss. 3-7 with Ps. 8 suggests that the God-given "glory" of humanity is not incompatible with suffering. This conclusion is reinforced by Rom. 5:1-5. To "boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2) means to "boast in our sufferings" (v. 3). As the Romans lesson from last week suggested of the relationship between the believer and Christ: "We suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (8:17).