

Pentecost B 2013

Acts 2:1-12

There was a question floating around cyberspace recently: If we had the capability to go back in time, how would we describe our smart phones to someone in the early 1950s? A tiny computer that allows you to access all of the information in the world? An immediate way to communicate with people anywhere in the world within a matter of minutes and sometimes even seconds? A handheld camera that allows us to take color pictures and movies with both sound and in color? Oh, and by the way, we can send those pictures and videos to anyone any place within minutes, as long as they have one of these little phones or a computer, too.

In the early 1950s, a standard computer easily filled a large room. The telephone still had a dial and a connected hand set and wired to a wall by a short chord. We could communicate on the phone as long as the party line wasn't being used – and we knew that because when we picked up the phone, we heard our neighbor's conversation. Cameras were pretty clunky, needed film and flashbulbs, and developing the film and seeing your pictures would take a few days and sometimes as long as a week. Videos – or home movies – were black and white, kind of scratchy looking, and often didn't have sound. But they were still exciting to watch.

So knowing all this, a so-called smart phone in 1950 would be an impossibility to most people. It was beyond common scientific knowledge and understanding. The only thing they were aware of was the communicating wrist watch worn by the cartoon character, Dick Tracy!

I suspect those from the 1950s would be stunned at the capabilities of our smart phones. They would be in awe, in disbelief. Some would say it's just a big trick and couldn't possibly be; some would call it the work of the devil; some would walk away, shaking their heads trying to wake up from a strange dream. There would be some who would be fascinated by the possibilities and would stick around to try these phones out, to see how they work, to understand them, and to actually use them. And if they were to time travel back to 2013 with us, they would see that smart phones had become as much of one's daily wardrobe as a wallet or purse. In fact they would notice that these little phone thingies are even attached to belts and straps so they are immediately available.

So thinking about all of this, the idea of little bright tongues of fire alighting on the heads of the apostles should not be so difficult to understand or accept. They're a means to an end; a symbol of what has been sent to us by God to guide us in a way that is to our own benefit and to the benefit of all of creation. Most of all, these little bright tongues of fire remind us of the one who created us, remind us to whom we belong, and they remind of us our responsibility to live and reach out to others in a way that shares all of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

These little bright tongues might be beyond our understanding and unbelievable, but they allow us to do things that might otherwise be very difficult. Kind of like smart phones but those little bright tongues help us do things we might never have imagined.

We are asked in our baptismal covenant: Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified?

The Holy Spirit is of God, is God, the giver of life, who lies within us and become the force that guides us, that drives us, that gives us the choice to move in the healthiest and loving and peace-

giving direction throughout our lives. Jesus is God among us, God with us – Emmanuel. The Holy Spirit is God within us.

In our ritual of baptism, we receive the Holy Spirit right after we are baptized with water. The priest puts her thumb in some holy oil – some chrism – makes the sign of the cross on the baptizee's forehead and says, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." We are baptized by water and the Spirit, as Jesus was baptized by water and the Spirit and as the apostles received the spirit on that Pentecost Day in the first century.

Once this happened, the apostles started preaching so that everyone present heard the words of the apostles in the languages of the people. "They began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them the ability." This is not speaking in tongues, or glossolalia, as some of our Pentecostal sisters and brothers do. But this is speaking in the languages of the people so that they can immediately understand what is being preached about Jesus and his teachings and his resurrection. That's why in some churches, you will hear the readings for the day read in different languages, according to the cultures represented in a particular faith community.

The purpose – the mission – was to get the word out about Jesus as quickly as possible and to as many people as possible. Kind of like a social network in its most primitive form.

People were amazed at what was occurring. Some listened in curiosity; some listened and pondered; some were fascinated by the event. And then there were the naysayers who thought this small group of followers was drunk; others probably scoffed and walked away; others probably said they didn't need to hear this bunk; and others probably said, "My life is just fine without this new stuff that they're talking about." That's a statement that we've all heard – even today in the 21st century.

But the message of repentance, forgiveness, and amendment of life; of being guided and driven through the power of the Holy Spirit was the message that the apostles and other followers of Jesus began to preach in countries and languages around the world as they knew it.

One of the purposes of the Holy Spirit is to bring a common belief that would transcend language and nationality and race and politics and anything else that serves to divide people. But the differences among people – language and race and politics and anything else – would not be negated. But there would be unity through a common belief that would overlie any of the differences that existed. Unity in diversity. And this ability to have a unity that would transcend differences would come with the guidance of the Holy Spirit in each one of us.

We pray in one of our intercessions for the holy and universal church, that we all may be one. We have prayed for this for about 1800 years. It still hasn't happened. The church split in the eleventh century between the East and the West, with one side calling itself Catholic, which means universal, and the other side calling itself Orthodox, which means right thinking. And each claims to be the church that traces its beginnings to Christ himself. And then the Catholic Church based in Rome was fractured in the 15th century and the branches were called Lutheran and Anglican and Presbyterian and a few other names. Those branches then split into smaller branches and then even smaller splinters. And the splintering continues to occur over even the slightest disagreements in a faith community.

Something that we forget in all of this celebration of the birthday of the church is that community is essential to our identity as Christians. We come together in a faith community, as did those first

Christians, to grow and strengthen our faith, and to continually renew ourselves and one another so that our lives are driven by the guidance of the Spirit.

One is not a Christian outside of community. This is not something that some like to hear. It has nothing to do with “feeling” God in the beauty of a sunset or knowing God through the wonders of creation or communing with God on the golf course, a surf board, or through the Sunday Times and coffee on the lanai. I’m not challenging that. But it is only a shadow of Christian faith if one is not in regular and active community with other Christians. It is in community that we struggle with our doubts; it is in community that we learn to walk the talk of the faith we proclaim; it is in community that we make mistakes, are forgiven, and learn to amend our lives. It is in community that we learn our story and values as a people of God and what gives us that identity as Christians. And it is in community that we are regularly comforted and renewed through our common worship.

We are called to do all of this in a way similar to the way that we learn about and grow in our individual cultures with our family and descendants and oral and written stories, with our food and traditions, with our dance and song, and with our regular gatherings that serve to renew and strengthen family ties.

Our faith transcends our cultures; it doesn’t attempt to erase them nor does it negate them. We are Christians above all. And then we are Chinese and German and Episcopalian and Canadian and Methodist and Micronesian and Catholic and Hawaiian and Polish. But we are Christians above all and that is what sustains our unity in our faith identity and that is what drives us to maintain that unity in Jesus Christ.

Just a word about the Holy Spirit functioning as our guide and driver. That’s the other thing our amazing little smart phones provide – a detailed set of directions to get us where we need to be. But in order for those directions to work, we have to choose to follow them. If we argue with the GPS and are in an unfamiliar location, we are likely to get lost, we will need to recalculate, and then spend time trying to get back on the right roads. I tend to argue and disagree with the GPS sometimes. Not a lot but enough to get lost more than I’ll admit.

It’s not so different with the Holy Spirit. She¹ does everything in her power to guide us and drive us in a way that is pleasing to God and that follows the teachings of Jesus Christ. But if we choose to exercise our free will and decide to go another way, we are likely to get lost. If we listen and trust, then we’ll assured of moving in the right direction. It might not be the easiest direction, but it will get us where we need to be. So try not to argue with her too much.

Finally a word about feeling the Spirit. This has been a pretty heady and foundational sermon. There is, however, a more important aspect to the Spirit. It’s the spiritual part of being religious. You can be both, you know. It’s the feeling one has when singing songs of faith together; it’s going up to communion as one body, regardless of the personal separations that might be present; it’s transcending to a different level when we hear a certain kind of religious music. This is a major reason that chanting is such an important part of our musical history. It takes us to a different place.

¹ I use the feminine pronoun here because the word spirit in Hebrew is a feminine noun: *ruach*. In Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word is *pneuma*, also feminine. Although previous versions of The Book of Common Prayer did not assign a gender to the Holy Spirit, the 1979 version that we currently use has assigned male pronouns in the Rite II version of the Nicene Creed. The traditional version can be read in Rite I, where no gender-biased pronoun is assigned. The reason for this change to a male pronoun in this particular rite is unknown.

This is why, when we sing hymns that we all know well, the body language of the congregation changes. Two weeks ago, we were singing the fraction anthem and I stood at the altar watching everyone. Some had their eyes closed, other were swaying – only slightly of course – and I watched parents holding their children, singing to them and rocking them in time to the music and helping them to feel one of those spirit-filled moments. There is great spiritual value when we come together and worship as one in the rituals of our faith. The more regularly we do that, the more often we will experience that same spirit in other aspects of our lives.

The tongues of fire and speaking in different languages and the presence of the Holy Spirit is not such a fantastic, metaphorical, unbelievable, or mythological story. It is a manifestation of God within each of us that provides us with what we need in our hearts and minds and souls to live as followers of Jesus Christ and to live lives that are pleasing to God. That is a good and just and compassionate and merciful way to live; that's who we are called to be as followers of Jesus Christ, as Christians. If we trust in the Holy Spirit and allow her to guide us, we will be surprised beyond belief at what we can accomplish in our lifetimes. Not like the technical wonders and surprises of our smart phones to those of a half century ago, but the wonders and surprises that come through this companionship with the Spirit of the one who gives us life.

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