

So, we have some colorful and festive additions to our worship space this morning as we celebrate the season of Pentecost: red paraments and banners, red in our clothing (if we remembered), red flowers. All of this is present as part of celebrating the Holy Spirit, represented in the red of flame, as we recall those tongues of fire that appeared on the first Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2. So, we have those *additions* to our worship space, but what's *missing* from our worship space this morning? Somethings that many of us find beautiful that have been up near the altar each Sunday morning of the Easter season we just left behind? Yes, the candelabras. During the 50-day season of Easter, we light these candelabras as part of the joy of our resurrection celebration. I think it's enlightening for us to recognize that although we may associate fire with the festival of Pentecost, and rightly so, there's also a fiery element that is unique to the season we are just leaving, the season of Easter. I refer not only to the flames on the candles of the candelabra, but to a more liturgically significant candle that has been lit. Starting on Easter Sunday, and throughout the season of Easter, which lasts 7 Sundays, we lit the Paschal candle, the candle of the resurrection. But today, on Pentecost, we will extinguish this candle, following our celebration of Holy Communion. From now until next Easter, it will be lit only on resurrection-related occasions, namely All Saints Day, Holy Baptisms and funerals or memorial services. So, why do we extinguish the candle, and where does that resurrection flame *go*? We extinguish it because the season of Pentecost, which we enter today, focuses on *our* growth, as a Christian community, in discipleship, love, and service. The resurrection flame is now to burn *within us*. "Let your light so shine," Jesus says. We are now the receivers and sharers of the fire of the Holy Spirit; the fire that empowers us to continue to dream and envision; the fire of the Spirit that creates and activates us as a Christian community to be the Heart of this community. Because that's what the Spirit does—create and activate community. Let's look briefly at our lesson from Acts to remind ourselves about the festival of Pentecost, before we look at the text from 1 Corinthians, which will focus on this Holy Spirit activation of gifts for the creation of community.

As Christians, Pentecost, along with Christmas and Easter, is one of the three major festivals of the Church year. We celebrate Pentecost as a kind of birthday of the original Christian church. But, Pentecost was

a well-established Jewish festival long before the Christian church came into being. It was a Harvest celebration, like our Thanksgiving. Did you know that in our time, Thanksgiving is the holiday when folks are most likely to travel back to their homes? Likewise, Jews from all over the known world at the time of our lesson had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate *their* harvest festival. They'd returned to their *spiritual* home. Peter and the other disciples were in this crowd. To refresh our memories of this context: Jesus has been crucified and raised; He has appeared to them a number of times, instructing them to wait for the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit. The fledgling Christian community has been doing just that, spending time in prayer in Jerusalem, waiting for a kind of Holy Spirit empowerment or activation that would come in a way and time that they did not know. But, as they were already in Jerusalem, near the Temple, they naturally go there to celebrate this familiar occasion of the Jewish Pentecost Harvest festival. They thought they knew how the celebration would go and what to expect, but they were wrong. God surprised them. First there was a rush of a mighty wind. Then flames of fire appeared. Wind and fire. We know the power of wind and fire. We know that both are double-edged in their impact; a Lake wind can cool pleasantly on a warm day, but a tornado can leave a path of destruction. A fire in a furnace or fireplace can warm pleasantly, but a raging wildfire can destroy whole communities. This is a bracing reminder to us that God is not only loving and gracious, but powerful; God is by no means domesticated or within our control and manipulation. Yet, in this case, the power of wind and fire is creative, rather than destructive. What happened is that people began to speak in foreign languages that they didn't know how to speak in. They found themselves speaking about the mighty acts of God in a language they didn't know to people from other countries that they'd never met before. This meant that every person present, regardless of where they were from, heard and understood good news from God. Not surprisingly, the crowd was amazed and perplexed. We would be, too. We aren't necessarily comfortable with wind and flame, or with God's Holy Spirit, for that matter, who has a way of surprising and unsettling us.

But surprising and unsettling though it was, the presence of the Spirit created a community out of the thousands baptized that day. And that was no small feat. We have only the first four verses of Acts 2 before us this morning, but the entire lesson from Acts 2, as we hear read most Pentecost Sundays, is the horror of the

lector as they wade through the list of nationalities that were present: had we those further verses, we would have read that those present included Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, *and* visitors from Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs---it's a mouthful. Because these are people of different ethnicities, nations, languages and backgrounds. Not at all a likely group to band together in a community that effectively will change the world. They couldn't even understand each other! Except they could on Pentecost, because a miracle occurred, a miracle worked by the presence of the Holy Spirit who bridged those linguistic and cultural barriers to form and empower a Christian community. That's what the Spirit does. The Spirit creates, empowers, and activates Christian community for the sake of the common good, the sake of the whole world. That's what St. Paul explains further in our lesson from 1 Corinthians 12.

Paul, in this section of his letter to the church in Corinth, is addressing a concern that has arisen, namely that the Christians in Corinth have a problematic attitude about their spiritual gifts from God. It had become a kind of competition: who was the best Christian? Who was the most spiritual? Who was the most faithful, the most generous, had the best visions, could speak in tongues the longest, and so on. They were completely missing the point of spiritual gifts from God, which according to Paul, is that they are intended to be diverse and complimentary, *not* competitive. And they are intended to serve the common good, not to puff up the ego of the one gifted. Paul, if you like, was very democratically minded when it came to the gifts of God within the community of the church. In a democracy, it's standard that every single person is gifted by the government with one vote, and that vote counts equally regardless of anything else about that person. Within the community of faith, God gifts every single person with a gift of some kind, and every gift is equally important for the common good of the community, regardless of anything else about that person. Paul sees that gifts are diverse, and they are intended to be; he lists a number of gifts in our lesson, but it is a far from comprehensive list. Throughout his letters, Paul mentions gifts ranging from what we might call ecstatic gifts like speaking in tongues or prophecies—gifts we generally aren't as likely to cultivate as Lutherans, admittedly. But he also speaks of healing, teaching, encouraging, hospitality, faith, generosity, and other gifts too. Everyone has at

least one gift, and their gift is as valuable as anyone else's gift, and it is to be used for the common good, to build up the community. It's not a *contest*; it's a *collaboration*. It's not for self-aggrandizement; it's for the sake of the world that God so loves, no exceptions.

So where does the Holy Spirit, whom we celebrate this morning on Pentecost, come into all of this? Well, it is God's Holy Spirit who creates community; God's Holy Spirit who gives these gifts for the sake of the community, and God's Holy Spirit who *activates* these gifts. Let's kick around that last concept a bit, because the notion of activation, although this letter was written by Paul around 2000 years ago, has a strangely *contemporary* sound to it, doesn't it?

I invite you to think about what needs to be *activated* within our present society. Let's see....you get a new credit card in the mail, you have to call and activate it. You receive a gift card for a favorite store, you need to activate it before use. You might activate yeast before using it in bread or other recipes. You might need to activate a new cell phone before you can use it to communicate. Chemical reactions need energy to be activated, called activation energy. For example, in starting a car engine, a spark activates the burning of the gasoline in the engine. The combustion of gas won't occur without the spark of energy to begin the reaction, and your car won't go. So, how apropos are these examples? To communicate, to utilize, to create nourishment, to go, there needs to be *activation energy*---sometimes even in the form of a spark, like the spark of the Spirit in fire. Paul maintains that while there are varieties of gifts, services, and activities, there is one God who *activates* all of them in everyone. A few verses later, after listing a number of diverse gifts, he adds, "All these are *activated* by one and the same Spirit." So, in other words, the Holy Spirit gives to everyone a gift to be used for the common good; and such a gift or gifts aren't given to just *everyone else*, they are given to *you*, to each of us, to be used for the common good. Don't go and get all Minnesota self-effacing and claim you have no gifts; in making that claim, you're turning the Holy Spirit into a liar. *Everyone* has a gift, be it offering friendship, putting on the coffee pot, envisioning where the congregation needs to move in the next decade, working in the Memorial Garden, singing in the choir, teaching VBS, or what have you. *You are gifted.*

Period. (Or God lies!)

But that gift requires activation by the Holy Spirit. How does that happen? I'm going to suggest that activation occurs within Christian community and within worship. It's very unusual for me to leave here on a Sunday morning or after a Wednesday night community picnic with less inspiration than when I came; I nearly always leave time spent with community and/or in worship feeling uplifted, inspired, and---if you will---*activated*. Isn't that true for *most* of us, *most* of the time? Isn't that part of why we show up? Being welcomed, being loved and supported, hearing God's word, participating in spirited music, receiving Holy Communion, if these aren't all sparks of the Spirit to activate us and our gifts, then what could be? And what a bonus: I often associate activation with hassles, tedious phone calls, efforts to get in touch with the right resource and waiting in line, and similar experiences. But the activation of the Holy Spirit is energizing, empowering, even joyful. Does it get better than that? How good is God?! How generous is the Holy Spirit, who gifts and activates us? How blest are we to be the recipients of this goodness, this generosity, this activation, and a part of this loving community? This morning, we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church and the giftings of the Holy Spirit to *us and everyone*, as we celebrate this ancient and fiery festival of Pentecost. Amen.