

**Sermon Preached May 31, 2009
Year B, Pentecost
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson**

You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; * and so you renew the face of the earth. [Ps. 104:31]. Amen.

When my family and I traveled back and forth from Lithuania to the States, we often had a layover in Amsterdam. For those of you who have never been there, the Amsterdam airport is enormous. It is like a small city with shops, restaurants, hotels, parks, casinos, and more available to tens of thousands of people, all while never passing customs or having to officially enter the country. It's a major transfer point for people traveling all over the world. On one trip going home to the States, we had a seven hour layover in Amsterdam. With two children in tow ages three and seven it was imperative that we find a playground to keep them occupied and tire them out before the next leg of the journey. We soon found the perfect spot. It was a huge playground and jungle-gym crawling with several dozen children from all over the world. We nodded to the other tired parents and collapsed in a spare couple of seats to watch Duncan and Emma play. However, I soon realized the effect of our prior two years in Lithuania. Emma was speaking to all the children in the airport in Lithuanian! She knew how to speak perfect

English, but all the children she knew in Klaipeda only spoke Lithuanian. So in her little four-year-old mind, Lithuanian is the language one speaks to children. So she did. I started to correct her and have her speak English, but then realized two things:

- 1) These children were from all over the world. They spoke Arabic, Spanish, German, Korean, French, Greek, Russian, and Chinese. Whether Emma spoke in Lithuanian or English was irrelevant, the kids didn't know her languages.
- 2) The children all got along beautifully anyway. They didn't need to know each other's languages to be understood. Somehow the shouts, laughter, gestures, and enthusiasm of childhood was language enough for them all to play and be friends.

This story struck me as a good analogy as to what was happening on that first Pentecost Day. Jesus has died, resurrected, and ascended to heaven. The disciples are happy, but confused as to what to do next. Jesus had promised them that after he left they would be sent an Advocate to help them, the Holy Spirit. So the disciples gather on the 50th day after the resurrection and suddenly, like a rush of wind, the Spirit comes and fills them with fire. They start speaking in many languages. Jerusalem is filled with pilgrims from all over the known world, and

they hear the gospel proclaimed, each in their own language. Like the children at the airport, there is understanding between diverse people despite the language barrier. The Spirit creates unity out of diversity.

So what IS the Holy Spirit? We speak of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We know the Holy Spirit is God, but many of us are a little fuzzy of its identity beyond that. Yet, if you look at scripture, the Holy Spirit is mentioned throughout. At the very beginning of Genesis we learn that a “wind from God swept over the face of the waters,” and from that creation was born. We hear later the prophets speaking God’s word throughout the Old Testament, and each time they were inspired by the Holy Spirit. In today’s readings we learn that the Holy Spirit will pray for us, guide us into Truth, declare the things that will come, and shall give prophesy, vision, and dreams. In other readings we hear that the Holy Spirit is given to us in baptism, she casts out demons, teaches, guides and leads us, moves us, warns us, comforts us, gives hope, and through her we enter into the Kingdom of God. Through the Spirit we also receive gifts for ministry to use for the common good, and that she lives within us always. God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, both God’s love for us and the love we in turn share with the world. The Holy Spirit is an intangible movement of the power

of God, and today, the Day of Pentecost, we celebrate her passion, guidance, and love in our lives. [Just look at the decorations in the church!]

One of the greatest ongoing gifts of the Spirit is that she helps us discern God's will. I think this aspect of her will become increasingly important over the years. Some of you may have heard the vestry speak of the *emerging church*. It's an idea that has been gaining a lot of traction in Christian circles for a few years, and with good reason. The gist of the emerging church is the belief that Christianity, or in fact most every religious tradition, goes through a great upheaval about every 500 years. It re-evaluates itself, its beliefs and practices. It becomes a time of renewal and change; keeping the good stuff, but perhaps discarding some unhelpful baggage that has been picked up along the way. The last time this happened was the Reformation, about 500 years ago. We are due!

A big part of the church's reevaluation of itself is questioning its source of authority. For the 500 years before the Reformation the church, and by this we mean the Roman Catholic Church, looked to the Pope for its authority. For a variety of reasons, the authority of the Pope, over time, was called into question, until finally in the year 1517 it was directly challenged by Martin Luther. Thus began the Reformation. One of the hallmarks of the Reformation Churches was

that they no longer looked to the Pope as a source of authority. They looked only to the Bible. If a belief or practice could not be supported by scripture, it was discarded. At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church also went through a re-evaluation and came out stronger in the end, although was able to maintain the pope as an authority.

So for the past 500 years scripture has been the main source of authority for Protestant churches. But now, like the popes of old, it is being called into question. Not the idea of scripture, per se, but that it is infallible and absolute and the end of all that God has to say on the matter. It is still foundational, but the problem churches have discovered is that while there is only one Bible, there are MILLIONS of ways to interpret it! So the question becomes not, “Do you follow the Bible?” but “whose interpretation of the Bible do you follow?” Two faithful Christians can believe radically different things. In addition, the Bible doesn’t always address all of our modern concerns.

This is where the Holy Spirit comes in. Let’s consider the issue of slavery. We all know that slavery is evil. It is a sin. God does not condone one group of people oppressing another. The Bible says so. WRONG! In fact, the Bible not only supports slavery, but gives masters rules about how to treat their slaves and slaves

how to obey their masters. The Bible very much supports slavery; at best it treats it like an unpleasant necessity. During the American Civil War the churches had a terrible time. You see, for many of the Southern Churches they saw an attack on slavery as an attack on the Bible. In fact, that's what it was. For Northern Churches to call southern slave holders sinners was outrageous. Southern churches, rightly, pointed out that slavery was supported by the Bible. And if you believed the Bible is authoritative, you support slavery. To them the Yankees weren't Christian. They were spitting on the authority of the Bible. A Yankee attack on slavery was an attack on Reformation Christianity. Because the Northern Churches were looking to something more than the Bible for their authority in this matter. They were looking to a new source of authority. They were looking to the Holy Spirit.

You see, the Bible was never meant to be the be all and end all of God. It is authoritative and foundational to the Christian religion, but it does not say everything God means to say about all things. Ours is a living God who continually reveals Herself to Her people. God's love and wisdom is proclaimed in scripture, and it continues to be proclaimed in the lives of His people today, by the movement of the Spirit. The Spirit moving in you and me guides us to right living and loving. Granted, it was easier for Northern churches to hear the movement of the Spirit on the matter of slavery when their livelihood was not dependant on it,

like it was in the South, but they did hear it. Faithful Christians looked at the institution of slavery and through prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit moving through them, came to realize slavery was a great evil. So much so that they were willing to go beyond the Bible and trust that God's word in the Spirit was sharing new and fuller information.

Jesus said, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." Jesus himself agrees that that all the teaching that he did for three years and all that was written down in the gospels, wasn't everything. There was more. So much more, in fact, that he had to send the Spirit to guide us. His life and the portions of it recorded in the Bible, by Jesus' own admission, was not the final word.

The Bible is one important word, but not the only one. The Spirit is also a source of Truth about God, and that Spirit guides us today. The Holy Spirit does not contradict the Bible, but simply enhances and builds on what is there. God's word is ongoing. So where does the emerging church find God's authority? It has determined that the Bible is not the only authority, and it looks like the emerging church will turn to the Holy Spirit. This next age of the church may well be the age of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit guides St. Paul's whenever the Vestry offers prayers before a meeting so that God's will may be accomplished. The Bible can't tell us what to do about the fire alarm system, but the Spirit can. The Spirit guides you whenever you ask for God's help in making the right decision in a matter. The Bible can't tell you whether to skip an important work meeting or go to your son's baseball game, but the Spirit can. The Bible can't tell whether the church school can put on the play "Esther" in only one month, but the Spirit can! It said yes! And they did! You could tell the Spirit was alive in the Parish Hall last night!

The Spirit works best in community. When discernment happens in a group and the Spirit is invited into the discussions, then the Truth is most likely to be revealed. And the Spirit is given in Baptism. As the water is poured on you, so too, the Holy Spirit is poured into your heart, giving you love, wisdom, and discernment. In a few moments we will welcome three new Christians into the church. The Spirit is alive at St. Paul's in each one of us, and soon will be alive in three more. Each of their gifts and diversity will be joined to whole, creating a richer Body of Christ. The Spirit creates unity out of diversity. There may be many languages, many gifts, many diverse people, but in the Spirit we are one Body.

Amen.