

Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; 1 Cor. 12:3b-13; John 7:37-39 Pentecost A; 05.28.23; G. Miles Smith+

The New Testament believes we are living in the midst of an extraordinary gift. The Church was created by this gift and has a special opportunity to cherish it through our worship, fellowship, and service. And yet the gift is not limited to the Church—the gift is actually everywhere. There are plenty of people who live in this gift and don't even realize it and have no idea where it comes from. So, in some sense, Christians have been given an insight that others may not have. And yet it does not guarantee that we will live in this gift any more than anyone else. Whether any of us are paying any attention or not, nevertheless, God keeps giving this gift.

It sounds like this gift might be the *gift of life itself*. And that is true enough. The Psalm today talks about the gift of life. That is definitely the *foundational gift*—the gift that begins everything else. *And yet the New Testament speaks of another gift that builds on the gift of life and which is just as pervasive as life.* And especially today, the *Day of Pentecost*, we are called to name this new gift. It is the gift of...*the Holy Spirit*.

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Honestly, we just have to get over the idea that the Holy Spirit is something that is only the province of Christians like Pentecostals, charismatics, or other unusually exuberant Christians. That's a separate topic for some other day. *The larger truth is that the Holy Spirit is an extraordinary gift to us all. And every Sunday, the words we use to worship cause us to name the Holy Spirit—even if we don't know what we are talking about in the moment.* Because God keeps giving this gift, pouring it out *into* us and *through* us, and pouring it out upon the *world*. It helps if we notice—and if we cherish this gift of the Holy Spirit.

We could describe the Holy Spirit as a special movement of God, following after Jesus, that is everywhere renewing the spirit of life in people...and building bridges between the most likely and unlikely people. So, the Holy Spirit “lifts up our hearts”—something we say at every Holy Communion. The Holy Spirit can renew our spirit for life. That is no small thing at all, given how dispirited we can become from the bad things which human beings do to each other and the hard things that can happen to us. The Holy Spirit doesn't replace other good things that can help our spirits—but the Holy Spirit is the most fundamental renewer of our spirits. And the Holy Spirit, whether we realize it or not, helps create friendships and community, knitting together connections between all kinds of people. The apostle Paul says in Corinthians that the Holy Spirit works for “the common good.” *The Holy Spirit is all about the renewal of our spirits...and the renewal of human community.*

The Holy Spirit does this so invisibly most of the time that we can think that it is just us doing it—or that it isn't happening at all. The Holy Spirit's work is so invisible that we could mistakenly believe that the most important works being done in the world are the dispiriting works of conflict and destruction between human beings. And yet, in the midst of everything broken, God keeps giving this gift. And it is this gift which really keeps sustaining the world, moment by moment. It would seem that the Holy Spirit doesn't even mind not getting credit for this work of renewal since the whole focus of the Holy Spirit is not on *itself* at all but on its *work*.

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When we try to focus on the Holy Spirit what actually happens is that we end up being redirected by the Holy Spirit to *Jesus*...and all the *people* who have become our community. And the Holy Spirit is apparently quite happy with disappearing into the background so Jesus...and you and I...can be together. :) And we are.

Addendum:

What clarity we might manage about the Holy Spirit—or at least the Spirit’s works of renewal—usually comes in the midst of our worship. Which is why worship is so important. It can focus here what in fact the Holy Spirit is doing in many other places too. The most important thing is to give ourselves to be renewed by the Holy Spirit for the renewal of the world. And to be glad that anywhere we go, amid strangers, unknown places, and the scars of human destruction, the Holy Spirit forever hovers and broods and stirs the renewal of life.

As it turns out, we have a unique opportunity this morning to recognize the Holy Spirit in a way we might not ordinarily. Of course, it helps that today is the Day of Pentecost, expressly intended for that purpose. But also, especially today, for the first time in the history of Grace Church, we now have the opportunity to worship in the church this summer with a free-standing altar, made possible by Opus 77. And we will have some time to live into the experience of it, just as have many other Christians already before us in many other churches across the world. So I want to talk about how the Holy Spirit can be experienced through both free-standing and east-facing altars.

The most ancient form of the Christian altar is in fact this *free-standing altar*, where the priest officiates facing the people. It creates an opportunity to tangibly reveal us to ourselves--*as a community of people brought together by the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ*. If you feel your hearts “lifted up” then it can be through this experience of spiritual community. Sometimes Christians describe the experience of worshipping with a free-standing altar as being more *intimate*. And that is possible because it frees us up to actually see each other. *The closest comparison to our common experience, I think, is that worshipping with a free-standing altar is like gathering for a festive holiday dinner which, at its best, can be renewing of our spirits and how we feel connected to others.*

The *east-facing altar* invites a different experience of the Holy Spirit. It is not, as is sometimes described, that the priest “has his back to you” as if you didn’t matter, as if there was a severing of community between priest and people. Unfortunately, that rupture has happened—where for hundreds of years through the Middle Ages, the priest worshipped in a language the people themselves no longer spoke and the priests alone received Communion every Sunday. And still today there can be ruptures between priest and people that grieves the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit is very familiar with always needing to find new ways to work around the obstacles we create for ourselves.

When the east-facing altar is free from such a rupture between priest and people, then a different form of community can be revealed there, *by us all facing the same direction together in our common prayers at the altar*. The east-facing altar does not invite us to find our bonds of community by looking at each other, as does the free-standing altar, *but by looking together beyond ourselves*. Facing east together, the direction of the resurrection of Christ, and facing these sanctuary windows and their light, we are invited to face the mystery of God. Before that great mystery, the priest lifts up broken bread...the broken body of Christ...the broken shards of our own lives...and we speak into that mystery the words of trust that Jesus gave us to speak. We are invited to be united together both in our brokenness and in our hope in our common Father. *The closest comparison to our common experience, I think, is that worshipping with an east-facing altar is like standing with others facing the edge of the Grand Canyon, or the ocean, or layers of mountains, or a vast Icelandic wilderness...and surprisingly finding that those vast mysteries welcome us.*

People and priests may tend to like one altar experience more than the other. That’s fine. And that can change at different times in our lives. It is actually an unusual opportunity that Grace Church has that we can use both altars. Both altars can be true conduits for the Holy Spirit to move us. They both have their parts to play in the renewal of our spirits...the building of community together...and the part that God has given us to join with the Holy Spirit in the renewal of the world.