

June 5, 2022  
Pentecost, Year C  
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Acts 2:1-21  
Psalm 104:25-35, 37  
Romans 8:14-17  
John 14:8-17, (25-27)

Today is the Feast of Pentecost. Pentecost is one of the seven Principal Feasts of the church. The word *pentecost* is a slight adaptation of a Greek word that translates literally as “fiftieth day.” The apostles would have known Pentecost as the fiftieth day after Passover. Christians have come to know Pentecost as the fiftieth day after Easter.

When it comes to feast days, Easter is a *way* bigger deal than Pentecost. But while thinking about Pentecost this year, I began to wonder whether that priority ought to be reversed. That is, maybe Pentecost should be more important than Easter. Let me try to explain. If there is a Christian litmus test, it's probably this question: Do you affirm the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus? It might be a Christian litmus test, but you won't hear me ask it. In fact, on this point, I make plenty of room for agnosticism. That's primarily because, to be quite blunt, a person can affirm the literal bodily resurrection of Christ and still inhabit the world in ways that don't seem to me to be particularly Christian.

There's a cartoon that I used as a sermon illustration during Lent back in 2016. I've been thinking about that cartoon a lot lately, and so I'll resurrect it today. It's among a genre of cartoons that depict St. Peter at the pearly gates. You probably know what I'm talking about. There's a single panel. You see billowing clouds below and metal gates behind. St. Peter has a long beard and wears a white robe. He's often behind a podium, holding a quill pen over an open book. That's the Book of Life, which contains the names of those who will be admitted into heaven. In the cartoon I referenced in 2016, a man is standing at the podium, waiting to learn his fate. St. Peter is looking up and at the man, and St. Peter is saying this: “You were a believer, yes. But you skipped the not-being-a-jerk-about-it part.”<sup>1</sup>

Last week I saw a new St. Peter-at-the-pearly-gates cartoon. It was published in the wake of events in Uvalde (*you-VAHL-dee*), Texas. As usual, the cartoon is a single panel with clouds and gates and Peter and a podium and a book. But in this one, St. Peter is dropped down on one knee beside that podium. A small child stands before him. St. Peter's right hand rests on the child's left shoulder. Standing a short distance behind that child are an additional eighteen small children and two women, all awaiting their turns. The child with St. Peter is saying this: “Hi, we're from the place with the God-given gun rights.”<sup>2</sup>

It's been an especially tough few weeks for those of us who have deep-seated concerns about the dotted lines that stretch between Christianity and violence, Christianity and nationalism, Christianity and racism, Christianity and misogyny, Christianity and queerphobia, and, well, Christianity and just general political gamesmanship. I wish I knew exactly what to do with and about all that. I don't think I'm describing only myself when I say that the temptation to despair has become very strong.

When I think about that sort of Christianity, I almost envy the certainty that it entails. Note that I said *almost*. When I'm tempted to go there, I remember that it just can't be that simple. Jesus taught us a lot, but he did not leave behind a recipe book. Quite the contrary: the gospels frequently depict Jesus dismissing the whole idea of a recipe book. Apparently Jesus knew that human life doesn't work like chemistry. There are too many variables; there is too much flux.

What Jesus did leave behind is well summarized in today's gospel reading from John. Instead of a recipe book, we have us two essentials that never stop yielding new things. One is the instruction to keep his commandments, which is to say, to love God and love neighbor. The second is the gift of the Holy Spirit. That's it. It seems to me that the whole point of the gift of the Holy Spirit must be to facilitate loving God and loving neighbor. Maybe it does work at least a little bit like chemistry, because all these things get mixed up and *something* happens. But it's also very different from chemistry, in that *we* can't predict what's coming next. Sometimes it's beyond all our imaginings. It turns out that the basic foundation of not being a jerk is about so much more.

In the Book of Acts, Pentecost is the day on which Jesus' first followers received the gift of the Holy Spirit. They went on from there to do the seemingly impossible, which was to build the church. That's why Pentecost is sometimes called the birthday of the church. The truth is, the church hasn't always gotten things right. Sometimes the church has gotten things horribly, horribly wrong. But it's not too late. The church is always being renewed by the Holy Spirit. That's a good thing to remember on this birthday of the church, when it seems so very important. Earlier I wondered whether, among feasts, Pentecost should be more important than Easter. In this historical moment, I'm thinking that it is.

Earlier I also mentioned holding agnosticism on this Christian litmus test of a question: Do you affirm the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus? I'll admit, the truth is, I don't even find that question particularly interesting. If we must have a litmus test, then how about this one: Do you affirm the gift of the Holy Spirit? Do *you* affirm the gift of the Holy Spirit? Say *yes* to that, and things get *really* interesting.

Speaking of saying yes, this weekend is a big one for the Holy Spirit at St. Thomas's. Yesterday at the regional confirmation service, Bishop Laura Ahrens laid hands on Christy, Madeleine, and Ben. In a few minutes, I will baptize Caroline and CJ. It has been more than two years—two very tough years—since we last experienced these events in the common life of our beloved community. Finally, here we are. We see the Holy Spirit working through these people and we remember that the Holy Spirit is still with us. Look for it today.

And don't despair. God is still at work in us and in the world. The Holy Spirit moves through *you* and around *you*. Her *breath*, her *fire*, are *yours*. Claim that gift freely given. Let it kindle *your* passion; let it fuel *your* drive.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cartoon by Don Piraro, dated January 26, 2007. It saw it in a blog post by Justin Whitaker, “Mindful of your immortality?” Patheos, February 21, 2014, available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/americanbuddhist/2014/02/mindful-of-your-immortality.html> (accessed June 5, 2022).



<sup>2</sup> Cartoon by Andy Marlette, May 26, 2022, for the Pensacola News Journal, available online at <https://www.pnj.com/story/opinion/2022/05/26/marlette-cartoon-god-given-rights/9927522002/> (accessed June 5, 2022).

