

May 10, 2020
The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
Acts 7:55-60
John 14:1-14

Maybe you've heard said, in the aftermath of a special church meeting or worship service, words something like this: "You sure could feel the Holy Spirit!" I don't think I have ever said those words; when I hear them, I become immediately suspicious. This is partly just who I am, and stems from my natural reserved skepticism. That natural reserved skepticism is especially attuned to any sort of religious fervor, perhaps because I was raised Roman Catholic in a sea of evangelicals. But it has been vindicated by my experience since joining the Episcopal Church.

This has mainly to do with events related to the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in the life of the Episcopal Church. Over the years, there have been special Church gatherings of people adamantly *in support* of full inclusion, and there were other Church gatherings of people adamantly *against* full inclusion. Subsequent accounts of those Church gatherings generally reported some variation of the words, "You sure could feel the Holy Spirit!" Nearly exact words came at nearly the same time from both sides of the conflict.

When Christians are in conflict, how can both sides legitimately claim the palpable presence and therefore the assumed authority of the Holy Spirit? Is one side wrong? Is one side lying? Is the Holy Spirit fickle?

We are still in the season of Easter, which extends from the major feast day of Easter through the major feast day of Pentecost. Pentecost is the big Holy Spirit celebration day, but the Holy Spirit is a continuing theme throughout this time. Every year on the Sunday after Easter Day we hear the John version of the gift of the Holy Spirit, said to take place on that first Easter Day. Every year on Pentecost we hear the Luke–Acts version of the gift of the Holy Spirit, said to take place fifty days later. The Gospel writers don't agree on the timing of this event, but they do agree on its importance. To put it briefly, the Holy Spirit enlivens those first believers and quickens the embryonic church.

It is along these lines that the Holy Spirit figures in today's reading from Acts. There's more to the story than the portion we just heard. Our main character, Stephen, was the first Christian martyr; he was also one of the church's first seven deacons. Here's what Acts says a couple of chapters earlier:

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with

[six others]. The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.¹

As the story continues, Stephen's words and actions enrage some people, who take him before the council. There, filled with the Holy Spirit, he sees God and Jesus in heaven. His witness to this incites the crowd that will stone him, but he forgives them with his last breath. Young Saul, yet to become the apostle Paul, is there, standing by. As a man of religion he will go on not only to encourage but also to lead the persecution of the young church.

Jesus died of a state-sponsored death penalty, but Stephen is the victim of mob violence. And so it seems that religion-fueled mob violence has been part of the Christian story since the very beginning. But it would be wrong to claim that Christians have only been the victims. Sometimes Christians have been the perpetrators.

Stephen is the prototype servant and martyr. This week I couldn't think about his story without thinking about: the assault-rifle-carrying protestors in the Michigan state capital building; the coronavirus disproportionately ravaging Native American reservations and other communities of people of color; the murder of the jogging Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia. Maybe it's just that these things have been on my mind. Still, if we're drawing dotted lines from Stephen to us, we need also to acknowledge that dotted lines also reach from Stephen to there. Whether we like it or not, Christianity is part of these stories, too. These stories are also our stories.

The passage we heard from the Gospel of John is from the last supper. Jesus is preparing the disciples for his death with final instructions and reassurances. Jesus says he is the way, and the truth, and the life. I don't think he is talking about an eventual afterlife. I think he means *right now*. He means *right now*, for those disciples, and for *us*. When Jesus confers the Holy Spirit, he confers it for all for ever. The Holy Spirit enlivens those first believers and quickens the embryonic church. And, the Holy Spirit's enlivening and quickening is for every age.

The Holy Spirit is God with *us, now*. Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit to guide us in the unique moment of history that we are challenged and blessed to inhabit. That is something to celebrate, but we should save the celebration for Pentecost. In this time in between Easter and Pentecost, maybe our task is simply to sit with the Holy Spirit, quietly and soberly.

We are people of the Holy Spirit. Jesus gave us that gift; Jesus gave us that responsibility. I do imagine that God has a sense of humor, but I don't think the Holy Spirit is fickle. On the other hand, perhaps we humans are sometimes very hard of hearing. In this time of great lament, we are all grieving. Maybe it's the perfect time for Christians to focus anew on listening for the whispers of the Holy Spirit. In the raw places we are all inhabiting, maybe we are tender enough to hear her anew. May she give us the eyes to see, the ears to hear, and the heart to act.

Notes

¹ Acts 6:1-6 NRSV.