St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven
Day of Pentecost, 2026

Each semester when I close out my New Testament classes, I always ask for a quick, final written exercise, and the question is always essentially the same with slightly different wordings. Now that we're finishing up, what questions do you still have? What curiosities continue to linger? What surprises are you still puzzling over? I've done this for many years now and the responses are enormously helpful to me in planning the next semester. And while they vary greatly, interestingly I always get the same Top Two. The second most frequent curiosity is something I felt too when I learned of it and that's *just how tiny and fragile* the church was in the early days. It really just barely survived. And my students want to know more. How could this be and how *did* it survive? What got it going in the first place and what *kept* it going? The answer, as it turns out, is the heartbeat of the great feast we celebrate today: the answer is the Holy Spirit. It's the Spirit that fired and fueled it; it's the Spirit that in their view sustained it.

And as it turns out, the Spirit is the answer to the #1 most popular question and curiosity as well. It's a question I too asked when I first studied the New Testament. Where's all the stuff, I wondered, about "going to heaven?" Or about going anywhere else for that matter? We expect to hear Paul and others talk about this, but they don't. On this great feast day, we take this breath and this pause simply to note what they talk about instead, and yes, that's the Holy Spirit — the redemptive gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives, in us each, in us all. The gift of the Spirit *in the body*. That's what fired and equipped the church. They saw in this gift nothing less than precisely the eternity, the peace, the joy, the life with and in God that stood at the heart of faith and fueled all they did and dared and dreamed. . .and that, sometimes, we call "heaven."

And so first, yes- folks are surprised to learn just how small and fragile and vulnerable the church was all the way through the century, from the earliest writings of Paul in the late 40s right through the epistles of John and Revelation at the end of the century. Paul is working with communities that number *in the dozens,* believe it or not, only the dozens; his letters are then shared and savored by hundreds. That's it. And that's a surprise. For a world religion that would grow to 5 or 6 million in a few more generations and which now has followers that number somewhere between 2 and 3 billion, we're shocked to learn how tiny it was in its early days. And never more so or more poignantly than in this threshold moment shared by the author of Acts, just read to us by Chris and Charlotte Rose a few moments ago. Here, there number is very few indeed, and they are hiding, and they are afraid. They are threatened, they are vulnerable, and they are, for now, the church in its entirety, the baton handed on to them by Mary and the other women who first proclaimed the good news of new life, of promise fulfilled, of eternity.

Something transformative of course happened in that room on that morning and the church was born anew as that first small band moved from fear into action fueled with hope and energy and new light and life and the conviction that God's promises were indeed real and true and that the world would never be the same — a miracle, this rebirth, as we heard, forged in fire and wind and an explosion of sound and sensation and summons. And yet, as my classes never fail to note, the greater miracle was yet to come, and that's that somehow this tiny movement managed to survive its rough first generations that would include waves of persecution and martyrdom, only,

when those died down, to face shunning, shaming, false teaching, and the passing of the apostolic age and with it grief and loss. They would survive all of that.

And so yes, how did they do it? We're curious too, and here's what we want to celebrate, proclaim and contemplate just for a moment today, on this great day in the life of the church. They did it, as they saw it, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The miracle they proclaimed was the Spirit. The gift and the hope and this new life was the Spirit, the Spirit that stands at the center of Paul's deeply memorable words to the congregation in Corinth. It's the Spirit that fuels us, Paul says, and that empowers and fills us. It's what equips us each with gifts, all different and all necessary, and moreover with *tongues of fire*, voices through which these gifts can speak. The Corinthians were dividing along familiar lines of class and wealth and status. The movement could easily have died there. It didn't, because Paul built them back up by pointing them tirelessly to Spirit. Not with threats of what might lie ahead, but with an invitation to live as the body, to be that living temple right now, to know and share and celebrate the divine fullness of life in the Spirit.

And that leads us back to the second surprise. They didn't do it for *heaven* or for reward or to "go somewhere." This was a movement based, after all, in utter depth of conviction that we weren't going somewhere else to God but that *God had come here to be with us*. And not only to be with us but to abide in us and we in him. Whatever might have been negotiable in those earliest days, it surely wasn't this. It all hinged on this. God had come to be with us and in his departure from us had invited us into fullness of life in the Spirit so that this fuel, this force Jesus called *eternity* could remain with us and in us always. That was the gospel good news at its most raw and elemental: heaven had come to earth and had said "May this peace that passes all understanding be with you now and always. Receive the Holy Spirit."

And so for us in this beautiful place in this challenging time, we come today to bid the Spirit's guiding as we ask, simply and hopefully, "What and where is *our peace*?" How are we, each of us and all of us, being equipped to breathe peace into hurt, to breathe healing into division, to breathe wholeness and a word of redemption into brokenness? The answer, Paul would tell us, is already here, in the myriad and unlimited gifts reflected in this body, in voices young and old waiting to speak, ready to be visited with tongues of fire and sent into the world in the voices that are uniquely ours, filled with music and ready to make a place at the table; a spirit that says "You are home here" to all. We beseech after all that same Spirit that inspired an earlier generation of St. Thomas's to design and pay for an organ before they had a building; that same Spirit that led another generation to build a fellowship hall before a sanctuary; and then finally to create a house of worship open truly to all. No doors on pews, no rentals, none of those lines drawn here, ever. Music and home and a place for all have been *who we are* since the sensing of the Spirit's first gentle zephyrs and stirrings 178 years ago among those first souls who called themselves St. Thomas's. And today we dress up our church and ourselves in beautiful and fiery red and ask once again for those tongues of fire, ready in our own time to be sent, to share that gospel hunch, to proclaim that gospel good news, to breathe that gospel peace. Let us pray.

We ask for your forgiveness, Lord, when we forget the power that lies within, and trust instead in our own strength. Remind us of that glorious day when your Spirit transformed the lives of those who hid in fear into persons of enormous power that suprised even them. Renew any heart that has grown cold with flames of fire, as on that Pentecost, that we might be the church that you desire today and always. Amen.