

At the end of the homily today I am going to invite you to join me in making a profession of our shared Christian faith as it is expressed in the words of the Nicene Creed. You already know what you will be saying because you have said the Nicene Creed countless times in your life.

Together we will be saying that “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,” and also that we “believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God.” Thirdly, because today is the Day of Pentecost, we should pay especially close attention to our claim that we believe as well “in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.”

What does belief in the Holy Spirit mean to you?

What is your understanding of the Holy Spirit?

What has been your experience of the Holy Spirit in your life?

Do you have now, or have you ever had, or do you hope one day to have, an unmistakable feeling of God and Christ being present in your life through the mysterious actions of the Holy Spirit?

Today is the Day of Pentecost and it marks the beginning of the church’s long season of Pentecost that this year stretches from now until November 27<sup>th</sup> when Advent begins. Pentecost in the Christian church is the anniversary of the coming of the Holy Spirit. After his death and resurrection, and shortly before Jesus ascended to heaven, he instructed his disciples to remain in Jerusalem until such time as God’s promise came true and they were baptized not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus told them they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. The disciples must have wondered what on earth was Jesus referring to now. But they did as Jesus instructed. The disciples waited in Jerusalem until, as we just heard in the reading from Acts, fifty days after Jesus’ death and ten days after his Ascension, the Holy Spirit descended upon them with the sound of a great wind and with tongues of fire, which settled upon each of them.

It is one of the most descriptive, memorable and admittedly strange passages in all of scripture that describes how the first people to receive the Holy Spirit began speaking in foreign languages and preaching boldly in the name of Christ. That tremendous, yet to my mind somewhat unsettling first appearance of Divine power as the Holy Spirit, marked the beginning of the Christian Church, which ever since has regarded today – Pentecost – as its birthday.

Whenever I try to understand the mysterious Pentecost event of Christ sending us his Holy Spirit to serve as our perpetual guide for living our lives, I end up relying upon this simple example: A little boy was flying a kite. It was a windy day, and the kite kept going higher and higher. Finally, it was so high into the sky that it disappeared from view. A man passed by and saw the little boy holding onto the string. The man could not see the kite at the end of the string, so he asked the boy, “How do you even know you have a kite up there?” The boy replied, “Because I can feel it.”

Come to think of it, is that not also a reasonable answer to the question of how we can profess to believe that the Holy Spirit is the way that God and Christ make their presence felt in our lives? “How do you even know you have a kite up there?” the man asked. “How do you even know the Holy Spirit exists?” you might ask. The answer to both questions is the same: “Because I can feel it.” Although we cannot see the Holy Spirit, if we are willing to look, we can always sense and detect the presence of God and Christ through the Holy Spirit alive in our lives.

The Christian author Joyce Rupp has described the Holy Spirit as a ‘memory keeper.’ That makes sense. When speaking to his disciples before his death, Jesus told them – and I believe that every time we hear of Jesus speaking to his disciples, we should understand that he is also speaking to us – that he would be sending them an ‘Advocate’ – a supporter or encourager – to teach them everything they would need to know after he was gone. This ‘Advocate,’ which we call the Holy Spirit, would in days and years to come remind the disciples of all that Jesus had taught them so they could keep those teachings alive for generations to follow.

This is how Joyce Rupp describes the Holy Spirit as a ‘memory keeper’ in her life today. See if you can relate to what she says: “We have this same ‘memory keeper’ with us today. As nice as it sounds to have this wonderful reminder of the gospel principles that Jesus taught, I do not always like to heed the memory prompts I receive. Just when I am ready to make a snide comment about someone who grates on my nerves, I get this inner counsel about being kind. When I want to ignore someone who will probably talk ‘forever’ about their problems, along comes ‘memory keeper’ prompting me to be generous with the gift of my listening. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit does not give up on any of us but keeps on sending messages that reflect what Jesus lived and taught. It is up to us to heed those reminders.”

Before any of us can expect to experience the power of God’s Holy Spirit being expressed in us, we need to be open to the possibility of it even happening. We need to carry within us, by faith, a vision of what our life can be like, and what we can be like, if we permit ourselves to be shaped by God’s Holy Spirit.

There’s an old story about Michelangelo, the brilliant 16<sup>th</sup> century sculptor. One blistering hot summer day in Rome, Michelangelo was pushing a huge chunk of stone down a street towards his studio where he intended to sculpt it into something beautiful. A curious neighbor, perched lazily on the porch of his house sipping a cool drink, was taken by the sight of this old man laboring over such an old and rough looking object. “Hey, mister,” he shouted, “why are you breaking your back on a worthless piece of rock?” Michelangelo is reported to have stopped, wiped his brow, looked up at the man and replied, “Because there is an angel inside that rock that wants to come out.”

It seems to me that anyone who believes in the Holy Spirit, can also marvel at what beauty God might create from within us if only we will permit God to sculpt us into the person God would have us be.

There are, I am told, three distinguishing characteristics that the Holy Spirit produces in the heart of any person who is anchored in God. The first distinguishing characteristic is tranquillity, which is a sense of inner peace that accompanies our acceptance of the Holy Spirit. When a person experiences the Holy Spirit, the fuss and feverishness of anxiety, intensity, intolerance, instability, pessimism, and the tendency to hurry and worry begin to melt away. The result is a deep sense of personal peace.

The second distinguishing characteristic is gentleness. The true test of the spiritual life is how we handle life’s many ups and downs and deal with inequalities and disappointments and the sudden intervention of bad fortune and our temptations to deal harshly with ourselves and others. Gentleness is the Holy Spirit’s gift of self-acceptance and acceptance of others by removing our desires to deal harshly or meanly with anybody or anything. Gentleness confirms that Divine love is not limited, and God works through all things, great and small.

The third distinguishing characteristic the Holy Spirit produces in the heart of any person who is anchored in God is strength and steadfastness; the capacity to ‘stick it out’ or persevere. This kind of strength is a cooperation with God that empowers us to return love for hate, and to return respect for contempt, and to stand firm against the injustices we encounter in our lives.

Finally, combine those three fruits of the Holy Spirit – tranquility, gentleness, and strength – and the result is joy.

Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved by God and that nothing – not sickness, or failure, or emotional distress, or oppression, or even death – can take that love away. Joy is not the same as happiness. We can be unhappy about many things, but joy can still be in us because it comes from the knowledge of God’s love for us. The joy the Holy Spirit offers us does not separate happy days from sad days, or successful moments from moments of failure. This joy is a divine gift that does not leave us during times of illness, or poverty, or persecution. Joy does not simply

appear or happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it over and over again in response to those event and people who threaten us with sadness.

To choose joy does not mean latching onto happy yet artificial feelings. Choosing joy does mean the determination to let whatever takes place in our life, whether good or bad, to bring us one step closer to the God of life. Choosing joy is a choice based on the knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us.

As reported in that reading from Acts, the first Pentecost long ago was quite a ruckus. But the consequences for us, of receiving with open hearts and minds the power of Holy Spirit today, is a peaceful life of joy. **Amen.**

**Day of Pentecost**

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