

Day of Pentecost A

About this time last year, the preaching business got really tough.

I was puzzled and horrified and found it hard to figure out what to do faithfully with this time together. You remember it was election season, and the country was bitterly divided and on the precipice of making a choice, either way, that half the country regarded as the potential end of the Republic.

It was also a season of shooting, of attacks with elements of terrorism, intolerance of gay people,

and then also of tragic breakdowns between law enforcement officers and African-American men.

It went on for months, and I wasn't sure, as time went by, what else to say about it.

The Bible is full of lament, and those were useful.

How long, O Lord, must we suffer? How long will the heathen (sometimes us!) rage?

When will you remove the bitter taste from our mouths and the painful yoke from our shoulders?

Help us understand, we asked, in preaching and prayer, and help us change.

Help us to understand ourselves and other people.

Is that the most basic problem we all face, the understanding of other people?

I have noticed that they are all around us, these other people.

We are married to them and share beds and tables and chores with them.

We work with them, taking up their slack or letting them take up ours.

We are their children and their parents, their in-laws and neighbors.

We love them and they drive us crazy.

Moms and dads looking out over the opportunity and burdens of summer know what I mean!

And sometimes, these things come to head, and we part ways or almost do,

struggling to understand what someone is doing,

what they are talking about,

what they can possibly mean by their words and action.

And then there are those not close to us,

easier to understand only because we pay less attention to them,

until they give us reason to and prove to be as confusing as those we know well.

Sometimes we think it has not always been so,

that there was a time when we all understood each other better.

Oh, maybe we think of our childhood, when things were simpler for us,

because we didn't know all that the grownups were struggling with

and thought the world was one of peace and harmony.

Or we may think of a time when a powerful group, nation, or individual kept others in line,

when our misunderstandings and conflicts were buried under the rule of a certain kind of

authority.

In reality, we are a tribe subject to bitter misunderstanding.

Christians have a way of speaking to that; we are all subject to the power of sin.

Sin is really a wonderful, helpful doctrine to ponder.

Not a downer at all; it explains so much about ourselves and others.
Broken by sin, we always struggle to understand some others in our world.
But, enriched and blessed by the Holy Spirit,
we find it possible to live in peace and sometimes, even to understand one another.

When the Jewish feast of Pentecost came, the disciples were gathered in Jerusalem,
all of them Galileans, speaking the same Aramaic, with the same accents of the region.
But full of the Spirit, they spoke in other languages,
and the people from all the other regions of the world who had come to the Holy City heard them
all speaking in their own language;
they understood the Jesus-following and proclaiming Galileans.
But not all understood; some said they were just a bunch of drunks, babbling because they were
into the new wine.
Peter explained to them that what they were seeing, in the mutual intelligibility, the understanding
between Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Judeans, Cappadocians, Pontians, Asians,
Phrygians and Pamphylans, Libyans, Egyptians, Romans, Cretans, and Arabs
was a foretaste of the last days, the promised day,
when the Spirit would be poured out on all people,
young, old, women, men, servants, rulers, foreigners and homefolks,
all receiving a Spirit that would lead them understand each other and that,
in the meantime, might give them enough virtue and love to put up with one another.

Paul illustrates that promise in his description of the Body of Christ,
with its many members, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, all drinking of one Spirit,
persisting in their different gifts
but united in a love that is a greater gift than any of their particular gifts.

Which leads me to the last and troubling words that I read you a moment ago in the Gospel
lesson.

As Jesus breathed on them (or into them), he said
“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the
sins of any, they are retained.”

If you are inclined to think of Jesus giving people, like apostles, bishops, or priests,
authority over others,
you might hear this passage as a sort of passing on of spiritual authority to church leaders.
But if the disciples were not clergy-in-waiting, if they were less “The Church”
and more the guys who had been following Jesus for some time,
then what we might hear here is a word to all of us, wherever we are in the Body of Christ,
about our Spirit-born capacity to forgive,
which is the ultimate foundation of any long-running relationship.

Drinking deeply of the Spirit, breathing deeply of the Spirit, we are filled with divine possibility
that was not ours before.

Instead of recording old wrongs on our souls,
like demerits we use against others, we can release them and ourselves
by the power of forgiveness, which is our sharing in the saving work of Christ,
who has ensured the forgiveness of our sins in the suffering love of the cross.
Those we do not understand (Cretans? Arabs? Egyptians? Democrats? Republicans?)
we can indeed forgive, if the Spirit of God is at work in us.

And that forgiveness, which began with the work on Jesus on the Cross, will sustain us, until the
fullness of understanding comes.