

Pentecost Sunday, Year C

June 8, 2025

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH

The Rev. Patricia Rose

Happy Pentecost!

Are you excited? It's one of the church's seven Principal Feasts, considered the birthday of the church, and we're having East Coast Custard!

Of course, you can't experience the custard if I just tell you about it, no matter how good my description is, and even if you fully believe what I say, it can't substitute for actually tasting it, and as well you would not receive the nourishment of it. You have to experience it for yourself.

This little analogy points to what I'd like to reflect on today, something a little more profound than custard.

And that is that at the center of our celebration today is the Holy Spirit, who is in a sense a profound mystery to us. Not a mystery to be solved, but one to be entered and known. Something to be experienced, something you can only really know by experiencing it for yourself.

And I want to emphasize that the fire of the Holy Spirit, the grace, the energy is **real**. And by real, I mean "experienceable." We can feel it, tangibly, we have the subtle instruments to do that. And it matters that we open ourselves to the truth of this realness. Because if we're not open and available to that grace as real, then we miss it.

And this grace is like a holy fire because it is combustible with us, it sparks something in us, it is made to dance with us. There's an opportunity for us to engage with this living grace, to let this higher Wisdom engage **us**, to guide us, to comfort us, to lead us to be fully alive in God. We don't want to miss that.

So, we heard today in Acts, that, as promised by Jesus, the disciples feel the fire of the Holy Spirit upon them, and, as events are often recounted in scripture, the story is told in a dramatic fashion. It's told dramatically because it is pointing to something powerful and real.

The disciples are all in this house together, and there's a big gust of wind, causing a loud blast, flames appear among them, a flame resting on each of them. You know, I vividly remember coloring pictures in religion class at Our Lady of Victory Catholic school, of the flames on the disciples' heads at Pentecost. I remember enjoying coloring the flame, it was so fun with the outside red, going to orange, and the yellow in the center and colored darkly to be very bright.

And next, Luke tells us that they all start talking in different languages and the crowds that heard them were saying, "These guys are drunk! They're filled with new wine." It's 9:00 in the morning! What a strange scene!

We don't really know what happened exactly - maybe it looked just like my grade school coloring page with beautifully colored flames, Maybe I nailed it and that's exactly how it looked.

We also don't know what exactly each disciple experienced in those moments, probably something they could not have described really in words. And even if they tried it could not fully convey their experience. But we do know that **something** happened, because **something** really changed.

The same disciples who ran away terrified from Jesus at the crucifixion, nowhere to be seen; who were still confused after Easter, heard the news but went back to their lives, who didn't always recognize post-resurrection Christ; the ones who even at the Ascension, their last moments of perceiving this Risen Presence, were asking Jesus, "Is this it, now? Is this the time you're going to restore everything?"

But then, after Pentecost this little confused, afraid, ragtag group somehow became lions of courage and began spreading what Christ had shown them about love and compassion for **every** person, and how we ourselves are designed to share that love, just like an apple tree is designed to create apples. And as they courageously spread this truth in ways that people were drawn to, this formerly muddled group *birthed Christianity*. One of the major faith traditions in human history. Changed the course of the world.

By their work, we are here now. And though as a church many mistakes have been made along the way, and we still wrestle with how to express this radical love most fully and truly, this faith tradition has been and is a life-giving force of comfort and guidance for billions of people, countless communities. Lifesaving at times. Jesus' scruffy followers didn't do that alone.

Couldn't have done it without the greater graces and energy of what we call the Holy Spirit, without that greater Wisdom of Life, the wisdom that for example causes a tiny seed to unfold into a human being or a 3,000-foot Redwood tree. It's the wisdom that shows up in us as that longing to live our lives in that greater something that we sense is here. Or as the longing for humanity to stop creating a hell realm on earth, but to choose love and compassion over violence, greed, war, over the insanity of creating or supporting systems that cause people to suffer and starve. It seems like we should have learned to do that by now, right?

To bring this about requires our engagement, our combustion, with the greater wisdom and grace of God, with the fire of the Holy Spirit. And one way to begin that is to be open to this grace of the Holy Spirit, as real and experienceable, To be on the lookout for it, and be receptive to it in all its subtle forms, to learn to engage with, To have it be not just something we just read about or believe in, but something we *do*. But, it's hard! It's hard in at least two ways that I'm going to name.

First, it's hard because this grace is invisible to our eyes, incomprehensible to our logic, and it requires us to let some of our most fundamental concepts of reality break apart. As a species we generally don't like our fundamental concepts of reality disrupted. We don't like to consider that things aren't always what they seem or what we think they are. But they're not. To consider that, let's venture into physics.

We perceive that the reality here is that we are individuals in this church, sitting with other separate individuals. But our most advanced scientific descriptions of the universe don't confirm this.

Everything that is here - this pulpit, the pews, our bodies, these massive walls, the whole earth - all made of atoms. And atoms are 99.9999% empty space with infinitesimally small pockets of energy, nothing solid.

To get an idea of the scale of this, if you look in your service bulletin at a period at the end of a sentence, atoms are so small that trillions of them could fit on that period. Not hundreds, not thousands, not millions, not billions but trillions!

And the small pockets of energy in these infinitesimal space in these tiny atoms is the most powerful energy known on earth. If the nucleus of just one of those trillions of atoms were to be split open, it could produce a massive explosion that would affect the whole city and beyond, or be used to produce massive amounts of electricity.

This is all also invisible to us, beyond our comprehension, beyond our capacity to even imagine! Trillions of anything, or that small of a space, or that amount of power in that small of a space, or to imagine that there is nothing solid here, nothing separate and apart. That this is just a field of mostly space and a powerful humming vibration.

So, the reality of the grace of the Holy Spirit is even more mysterious, more inconceivable, more tangibly powerful, and in every way, more **real** than this scientific description. So we can't see Holy Spirit grace with our eyes and it's hard to logically understand it, but the miracle and great treasure from this abundantly generous and loving Creation is: We can experience it.

And that starts with opening to it as it real and accessible. And then we can learn to use our deeper subtler senses to perceive it ever more clearly, more fully. This grace is somehow both of the cosmic dimension, and yet operates with us in intimate, personal, and even loving ways, as if we matter. As if our choices matter.

We can invite this grace, draw strength and comfort from it, radically change as a result of it. But, there's the second thing that's hard about it.

Although it sometimes comes dramatically, it more often comes in a gradual process that asks a lot of us. A lot. Jesus described the cost when he told us the two greatest commandments. **love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and love yourself and all others this way as well.**

With all your heart, soul, and mind requires so much. Things like developing deeper awareness, accountability of our thoughts and choices, self-love, ongoing listening and receptivity, discipline, willingness to let go of some things we are grasping to make space for the new, and more. All to find our way (with God's help) to feel and to combust with the gentle presence of the Holy Spirit, and to learn to live in active relationship with it.

To open our gates to let grace flow through us like a might river.

It's costly. We turn everything over.

But, for what we receive, and for what we become, and for what we can give to the world through this - it's the bargain of all eternity.