

**Don Brown
St. Mary the Virgin, SF
May 15, 2016
Pentecost C**

“Come Holy Spirit our souls inspire and enlighten us with your celestial fire. AMEN”

Congratulations to those of you who had to navigate over or around today’s Bay to Breakers race. Well done! As you can see from the way the church is decorated with balloons (and in case you are wondering these are environmentally safe bio degradable balloons), and the symbols of the flames of the Holy Spirit that were carried in procession by the choir, today is a special day.

Today (at the 9 am service) we recognize(ed) the 20 young people [and one adult] who will be confirmed by Bishop Andrus at Grace Cathedral on June 4. They’ve studied, discussed, and learned about what it means to be a Christian who is an Episcopalian and that faith is not so much a list of things to be believed, as it is a journey of discovery about how God is at work in their lives and in the world around all of us.

When I was in junior high school we were assigned a book entitled: “The Story of My Life” by Helen Keller, the American woman who as a young girl began a valiant journey of discovery out of the isolation of both blindness and deafness.

Helen’s parents could not cope with all of Helen’s special needs and so they hired a young woman, Anne Sullivan, as her companion and tutor. Anne knew that unless Helen acquired the skill of human speech, she would never enter our world.

Helen behaved almost like a wild animal. Anne tried repeatedly to reach Helen but to no avail. Finally, one day in desperation and as it turned out, inspiration, Anne ran cool water over Helen’s one hand while repeatedly making the signs for water on Helen’s other hand, and finally Helen got it....objects had names. This was a revelation to Helen and the beginning of her journey into the world of human communication.

For Helen Keller this gift of speech came suddenly, unexpectedly. She experienced an epiphany, a sudden revelation of a life changing truth. She went on to become an internationally known and admired author and lecturer.

In this morning's description of the first Christian Pentecost in the Book of Acts, the gift of the Holy Spirit is linked with the gift of both spoken language and insightful hearing. As the author of Acts, traditionally considered to be St. Luke, tells us, "All of [the disciples] were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." (Acts 2:4) This is a reminder that from the beginning, God's universal message of love for all was meant to be shared in such a way that all people, no matter their language, culture, or geographical location could hear. The reading from the Book of Acts is a reminder that God will always find a means of speaking to us in a language we can understand.

This Feast of Pentecost teaches that we, you and I, have been gifted with God's Holy Spirit precisely so we

can embody the loving presence of the living God to a world filled with human woundedness, conflict, and brokenness. The old fashioned word, but still accurate, is "sin." Basically "sin" is about those attitudes and actions of ours and our in world that separate us from God and God's mission of love to and for all.

How does God's Holy Spirit speak to you? For some the Spirit speaks in words, or perhaps in the majestic sound of a church organ or choir, or maybe in the music of a funky reggae band. To some the Spirit speaks in tears, the cry of child, the plea of a refugee, or a street person, the stirrings in our hearts that lead us to deeper sensitivity and compassion.

For many the Spirit speaks in and through nature: the play of the morning sun on the towers of the Golden Gate Bridge, the sound of a fog horn, the beauty of flowers or the song of a bird. Of this I am convinced: God's Holy Spirit knows the language we need to hear in order for us to understand. God does not give up on us.

Pentecost is a reminder that we are to be attentive for the Spirit's promptings in our lives because those promptings are in our midst all of the time.

Two other observations about Pentecost: The first is that the Holy Spirit has given you a language or an ability to communicate in order to be a witness to God's healing, transforming, challenging love as you experience it in your own life. In other words, you can use your life experiences to share with others words that could be life changing for them.

Perhaps yours is a word of courage revealed in the way you have confronted troubles in your own life and emerged a stronger, wiser and more loving person. Maybe yours is a witness about forgiveness extended to someone who has wronged you, or an act of compassion offered to those who are hurting. Maybe yours are words of challenge about why it is important to struggle against injustice or maybe your call is to speak the truth in love to those who promulgate lies and untruth.

The second observation about the lesson of Pentecost is that God embraces all of us in our diversity. Our lives, languages, life stories, and gifts are dramatically different from one another and that is just fine. Our oneness as God's people does not come in spite of our difference but is manifest in and through our differences.

At the first Pentecost the Holy Spirit did not eliminate diversity. The Spirit did not speak some generic, universal language, a kind of Holy Esperanto that all people regardless of nationality could understand. Instead the Holy Spirit preserves differences, embraces a multitude of languages, and is constantly seeking to draw all of us together in a single symphony of God's peace and healing action in our troubled and broken community and the larger world.

This is the most important lesson of Pentecost, one we easily forget and therefore it is most important to remind ourselves.....differences need not tear us apart:

differences of race, or political party or ideologies.

AMEN

Differences of social status or sexual orientation, of ability or dis ability, of conservative or liberal theology.

Pentecost teaches us that God cherishes us in and through the very things that make us distinct from one another.

On this Pentecost may God's Holy Sprit speak anew to you, giving you peace where you most need it and assurance that God has a purpose for you to sow seeds of love and healing especially when it is tempting to behave otherwise. Helen Keller learned that truth from her friend and companion Annie Sullivan. This is a truth all of us need to learn and live.

On this Pentecost the Holy Spirit's speaks to us here at St. Mary the Virgin and to every Christian congregation the world over words that are clear and direct: Today I am sending you to be my presence in the world. In the name of my healing and life-giving love....go and make a positive difference.