

“So Now What?”

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
On May 20th, 2018

Romans 8:22-27, John 16:12-15

Today is Pentecost Sunday, our annual celebration of the birth of the church in Jerusalem, fifty days after Jesus' resurrection. You've already heard, in the call to worship, the story of that first Pentecost with its outpouring of the Holy Spirit in mighty rushing wind and tongues of fire dancing over the disciples' heads. You've heard how the disciples were able to communicate the good news in other languages as the Spirit gave them utterance. You've heard part of Peter's sermon and perhaps remember how 3,000 people were converted that day. Now listen for two additional, much less dramatic, bits of scripture. The first from Paul's letter to the church at Rome. Note what Paul says of the Spirit in this text:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

In our second lesson, from the Gospel of John, Jesus is speaking to the disciples in the upper room on the night of his arrest. He has just told them that it is necessary for him to leave, so that the Spirit can come to them. Listen for what he says about what the Spirit will do:

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

I know a good number of you watched the royal wedding yesterday morning, or have seen clips of it since. It was so beautiful, so well-executed, so imbued with tradition and yet in some ways such a breath of fresh air. It had the appropriate amount of Anglican pomp and precision, but also some passionate preaching of the Word and oh, that Gospel choir bringing fire and diversity to that British chapel. Wow. Wow to all of it. The Holy Spirit was in St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle, to be sure. How appropriate for the weekend on which we celebrate Pentecost.

My favorite Spirit moment happened during Bishop Michael Curry's "electrifying" sermon. He was rolling along, as Michael Curry does, talking about the power and way of love to change the world. You may remember it.

Talking about Jesus' sacrificial love, a love that gave even though he didn't get anything out of it, not even an honorary degree, Curry was just rolling along. Then he invited all who were listening to imagine a Spirit filled world where that sort of love is the way, to imagine neighborhoods and communities and governments and nations and business and commerce, where love is the way.

The man was out of his mind, as any good preacher should be. But that wasn't the best spirit moment for me. The best moment happened as he continued and here I'll quote him directly:

When love is the way, unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive, when love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook. When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the Earth will be a sanctuary. When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside, to study war no more. When love is the way, there's plenty good room, plenty good room, for all of God's children because when love is the way, we actually treat each other well, like we are actually family. ⁱⁱⁱ

That's when it happened. That's when the camera shot fell on Prince Harry, tears glistening in his eyes, not a few of them there I'm sure, because of the pushback he must have received for courting and marrying Meghan Markle. I mean not only is she not English—which would have been enough of a royal faux pas—she is not even white. And by the time Curry finished his thought with these words *When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all and we are brothers and sisters, children of God. My brothers and sisters, that's a new heaven, a new Earth, a new world, a new human family.* When he finished that thought, I was in a puddle myself.

But then again, I'm an easy mark.

Sometimes the Pentecost moment is easy to discern. Sometimes there is no mistaking the Spirit at work in our lives and in our world. Holy tears shed by a prince, a Gospel choir singing at a British royal wedding, and a word about the power of love to bring us together as a new human family are a pretty good indication of the Spirit's presence.

But all of this royal wedding stuff, and the celebration of confirmation and new members and baptisms we're having today has me thinking not just about the big dramatic moments when we can just tell the Holy Spirit is at work, but also the less dramatic ways the Spirit accomplishes what the Spirit is going to accomplish in, though, beyond and in spite of us.

Not just at the wedding when the day you've been preparing for and looking towards finally arrives.

Not just on the day of confirmation, when all of the time the kids and mentors put in leads up to a momentous ceremony, and they are rightfully recognized and celebrated whatever choice they make about joining the church.

Not just when, after a long period of looking around at congregations for just the right fit, you finally make the big decision to stand up front and join the church.

Not just on the blessed day of baptism when your baby, or your 5 and 8 year old, or you yourself, Tessa, are marked in front of a community of faith as God's own forever.

Not just at the ordination or installation day when you feel a special sense of God's presence and the knowledge that God has set you apart for special work. Not just on the graduation day when you walk across the stage, or your child or your grandchild walks across the stage, and your sense of pride and perhaps gratitude overwhelms you.

I'm talking about the other times. Times when it is perhaps less easy to sense the Spirit, or when it's harder to believe that you are beloved and that love is the Way, or when the tired old world really is just too much.

How do you sense and respond to the Spirit, the one Jesus called the Companion, then? How do you sense and respond to the Spirit when the shine has worn off? When the wedding is over and the work of marriage begins, when the baptism or confirmation day recedes in the rearview mirror and a life of living as a disciple of Jesus is before you—maybe eighty years of living as a disciple, thank you Dee, when you've become a member of the church or you commence to live after graduation? How do you sense and respond to the Spirit when, as the Apostle Paul says, you are groaning inwardly at all the pain in the world and in your own life, and you can feel the world groaning along with you, and you don't know how to pray and you can only trust that the Spirit is interceding with and for you with sighs too deep for words, how do you sense the presence of the Spirit when again, again, there is another school shooting.

It's easy to sense the presence of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But what about when it is harder to see and hear?

Well, sometimes we just hope for what we cannot see and we wait for it with patience, trusting the Spirit to help us in our weakness and *give us the courage to take the **actions we need to take.***

Let me be clear. Waiting with patience for what we cannot see doesn't mean that we don't take concrete steps in the direction of justice, mercy, and compassion. It means we let the power of love work in and through us in the meantime. We let that power inspire us to let go of grudges, and to not respond to evil with evil, to love our enemies and to pray for those who we may not like but are called to love, at least if we are led by the Spirit. We let that power guide our steps towards speaking and working for justice and serving those in need, engaging in prayer and meditation and corporate worship. We let that power buoy us to move through times of personal discouragement and depression, to keep us from giving up or giving in to any nagging sense that we are not enough or that we don't matter, because after all, we are children of God. We let that power remind us that it's not all about **us** as individuals or even as a community. There's something more at work in the world than just us. That's the Spirit.

How do I discern the presence and activity of the Spirit in my own life? How do I know it's the Spirit, when it is not as dramatic as Pentecost? First of all ask if what I'm feeling inclined to do is leading me in the direction of the fruit of the Spirit or not. Is it leading me to regard others—anyone else, ANYONE else, I mean anyone else—as less than human, to speak of them or to treat them like animals? Then it is not the Spirit. Is it leading me to lie, cheat, or steal? To break covenant in my relationships? To do things that harm the least of these my brothers and sisters? If so, then it is not the Spirit. Is it leading me towards something that will be destructive of my own soul? Then it is not the Spirit.

So I look for and I listen to that voice within me that leads me in the direction of love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. Sometimes, let me be honest, it seems easier and more satisfying to head in the other direction. It seems easier to hate. It seems easier to give up. It seems easier to hold on to resentments and grudges or to avoid taking the kind step. Which means that if I'm feeling something in me leading me to do something hard, to get outside of myself for the sake of someone else, or to take a courageous stand in the name of love—**that's probably the Holy Spirit.**

Here is another way that I can sense and respond to the presence of the Spirit.

Years after this confirmation day, I can take a look back at the faith statements of our confirmands. Five, ten, maybe fifteen years from now, maybe I pull out Jayne's statement. Jayne, who wrote, that *love is the most important thing in our lives, and that we should love others like we love ourselves and our families—and that we should be kind to others, too, as kindness generates love and love generates kindness....* If I can look at that fifteen years from now and feel moved to act in loving and kind ways, that's the Spirit.

Or, years from now, perhaps I take a look at what Atticus wrote. Atticus, who called God *a force that connects to everything on our earth made by a bang, not a physical being, but one who stays in my heart and mind, giving me at least one friend. Guiding me in the right direction, making me think, making me dream, and making me learn and love. Pushing me to be the best I can be, because that's what people who love you do. For better or worse, I know God is there for me. I don't know what I would be if God was not there for me.* If I can look at that fifteen years from now and say, "That's true, I should act on that," that's the Spirit.

Or, what about Jack Huffard, who wrote, among other things, *that God is love and he/she loves you no matter your race, ethnicity or religion, because God is the creator. God plants the seed of love in all of us and whether or not we are good soil, we choose to accept or reject that seed of love.* If ten or fifteen years from now, I read that and see the fruit of that seed, that openness, that tolerance, has sprung up in me, that's the Spirit.

Or Sam Bennett, who in his statement spoke, among other things, of *God as Lord and catalyst of all creation, and Jesus coming to show us how to love one another and worship God in the right way. And that God accepts us with all of our imperfections and unique spiritual views. And that every church member has a part in building up the foundation of heaven.* If I can look at those words, ten or fifteen years from now, and say "That's true" and I've done something about it by loving people and building up the foundations, that's the Spirit.

And what about Tessa, dear Tessa, who is getting baptized tonight, and who came into confirmation at the invitation of a friend. Her statement of faith was a picture. A picture of how God has been with her in the midst of trials and tribulations and hardship and joy and prayers answered. If I can pull that picture out ten or fifteen years from now and be moved still by the power of what God can do, that's the Spirit.

This community of faith welcoming Tessa, encouraging her towards baptism, being the body of Christ... It wasn't really all that dramatic. It was just faithful.

So, now what? After Pentecost, now what? Prayer, which leads to action. Belief, which leads to compassion. Community, which leads us out of ourselves and into love and kindness. That's the Spirit.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

¹ [Royal wedding time and date: When will Meghan Markle and Prince Harry...](https://www.independent.co.uk/royalwedding/royal-wedding-date-time-2018-meghan..)
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ⁱⁱ Michael Bruce Curry is the 27th and current presiding bishop and primate of the Episcopal Church. Elected in 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ [Bishop Michael Curry's Royal Wedding Sermon: Full Text Of 'The ...](https://www.npr.org/sections/...way/.../bishop-michael-currys-royal-wedding-sermon-ful...)
<https://www.npr.org/sections/...way/.../bishop-michael-currys-royal-wedding-sermon-ful...>