# The Holy Spirit and the Great Work

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church*
*The Day of Pentecost, June 8, 2025: Acts 2:1-21, John 14:8-17*

Today is Pentecost, the great feast of the Church that commemorates the Holy Spirit transforming a group of grieving, fearful disciples into an utterly vitalized, growing, compassionate, healing group of apostles. On that day as you heard in the reading from the book of Acts, a sound like the wind came rushing into the place where they were gathered, the appearance of flames of fire came upon each of them and suddenly they were sharing in other languages about who God is and what God does. Pentecost is what changed the course of history. Instead of Jesus becoming a martyr who got a footnote in a history book, a movement began and quickly spread through the earth. Before Pentecost, the disciples were huddled together trying to make sense of the trauma and tragedy that had so brutally ended their time with Jesus. After Pentecost, the disciples grew exponentially. They shared their resources so that no one was in need. They healed people who were sick and were filled with power and courage and compassion. And what made all that possible was the Holy Spirit.

In the reading from John's gospel for today Jesus tells the disciples that they will do greater works than he did because he is going to the Father and because God will send them the Holy Spirit. Think

about that for a minute. Jesus says the disciples will do greater things than he did, because he was leaving? How does that make sense? But how would the disciples ever discover what they were capable of, with God's help, unless Jesus left in his physical form and they could no longer sit by like spectators? The coming of the Holy Spirit was an invitation to spiritual maturity and power to those first disciples in the upper room and to us today. It was and is an invitation to no longer sit in the pews relying on clergy like me to tell you who God is, but to know for yourselves, directly from the Holy Spirit, what is true and what God invites from us.

I went to a Quaker college called Earlham in Indiana. Quakers believe that there is something called the Inner Light, what we would call the Holy Spirit, who enlightens every person without exception and whose wisdom we should listen to, seek out and share. Their church services are called meetings. They sit in a circle in silence and wait, and each person is given the chance to speak from the heart what they feel the Spirit is saying to them. They believe so strongly that the Inner Light gives each person wisdom that they make all decisions by consensus, doing the hard work to wait until each person is satisfied that the decision they are making is the right one. I have a friend from college who is a Quaker who said that for a while his sharing in meetings was too combative, but that a Quaker elder spoke with him about it so gently that he didn't even realize it was a correction, and that it changed the course of how he showed up.

All people are God's people. The Holy Spirit resides within each one of us. And when the Holy Spirit shows up, there is unity in the midst of difference. When the Holy Spirit came upon that upper room on the first day of Pentecost, they didn't all start talking the same. Quite the opposite! Suddenly there was more diversity, not less. Rather than asking everyone to speak one language, and demonizing people who did not, the Holy Spirit empowered them to speak the languages of the many visitors and guests who were in Jerusalem—people from all over the world. This gracious hospitality is what the kingdom of God looks like, and it is explosive and beautiful and untameable. In the kingdom of God, one nation is not elevated above all other nations. In the reign of our Creator, the Spirit is poured out upon all flesh—people of every gender and age, people who are free and enslaved, everyone. The Spirit grants dreams and visions, ideas and power to all. Everyone has wisdom; everyone has something to offer for the well-being of the whole. Everyone is needed. Each of you is needed.

Earlier today we heard people from Haiti, Colombia, Mexico, the Philippines, Russia, France, Lesotho, China, and Germany speak this marvelous story in their languages. We even had Père Markendy, the priest from our sister church in Haiti, doing the reading live from Haiti in Creole over Dianne Pizey's phone. We are embodying a different reality than what we read on the news. Even when the violence and craziness in the world comes too close to home, we are embodying love and compassion and inclusivity and welcome.

There is a new young adult group at St. John's that has got about 15 people having dinner once a month, and if you are a young adult and would like to be involved please let me know and I'll make sure you get on the list. This group has gay and straight, cis and trans and non-binary folks in it. The last time we met we talked about how people managed their queer identities and faith. Some people spoke about having been deeply wounded by church but knowing that God was always about love. Some people spoke about St. John's being an affirming and safe place to land for queer people. One person who is straight said that she had recently come from a different church that was not affirming of queer people, but that she told a gay friend of hers from out of town about our group and that that friend felt some healing and encouragement just knowing our group existed.

God's Spirit is poured out upon *all* flesh, all people. The Inner Light resides within everyone. God created the world and in each wave of the kinds of life God created, God called everything good. The Spirit hovered over the face of the deep as God brought Light into being, like a mother hovers over the face of a newborn. The Spirit is the primordial force of creation and of love that animates all that exists, without which we would not be here.

At times with all that is terrible happening in the world, it may feel like the terrible things are the reality and the peaceful things are the idyllic pipe dream, but that is not true. The beautiful times are as real as the terrible ones. Your walk by the quiet lake in the

sunshine with the green grass growing and the birds singing and the children playing and smiling is as real as the people shooting guns outside our building on 42nd street last Friday. And more deeply, the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the deep and God calling everything good is the spiritual DNA, the genetic code if you will, of everything that exists. That is the deepest truth and reality, and nothing can take away. At Pentecost, God's unconditional love began streaming out in all directions as the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is within each one of us and is available to all of us all the time.

We do not need more bad news. We have plenty of that. We need good news, and thank God, we have that too. The good news is that Jesus did not mean his beautiful, healing, powerful life to be one-and-done. He sent us the Holy Spirit so that the great work could keep going, so that healing and affirmation and radical, unconditional love could keep manifesting everywhere, world without end. So that this unconditional love could pour out of each of us, whether we are a citizen or an immigrant, gay or straight, cis or trans or non-binary, black or brown or white, Indigenous or otherwise, elderly or newborn, rich or poor, everyone. All. Each of you is an essential part of this great work, in your daily lives, whether you're a student in school or retired and living alone, whether you're a stay at home parent or an executive of a big corporation or between jobs and not sure what is going to happen next in your life or where your next paycheck is going to come from. None of these details about your life can touch your essential

beautiful soul, which is united with the Holy Spirit and which has truth and wisdom and power and your unique gifts to offer for the well-being of the whole.

And we need you. We need your whole self. The ecosystems of the world operate best when each being is doing its part being itself fully, with health and vitality and love for all other creatures. May the Holy Spirit fill and empower us to have courage, to take risks, to love without conditions, to offer all of who we are and all of what we have for the great work of making everything whole. **Amen.**