

April 11, 2021

I love this gospel lesson because there's so much packed into it. Today I'd like to do some reflecting on the sending of the Holy Spirit, "Jesus breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

The traditional scripture lesson that describes the sending of the Holy Spirit is from Acts, and we'll hear that story again next month on Pentecost. It's a dramatic story of the rush of a violent wind and divided tongues, as of fire appearing among the disciples, and they start speaking in different languages. The Holy Spirit comes upon them and one of the biggest barriers between people, the language barrier is obliterated.

In the gospel of John, the sending of the Holy Spirit is a very subtle story with a big association... In the second creation story, God takes adama, or dirt and fashions a dirt creature and then breathes into its nostrils, the breath of life. So, in a very similar way, Jesus' breaths the Holy Spirit onto the disciples. This breath is literally creating, animating new life...

Jesus appears in the resurrection, and new life is breathed into the disciples.

From our confirmation days, we remember that the Father creates, the Son redeems and the Holy Spirit sanctifies. I like to think of the Holy Spirit as a guide. A presence that is a stable witness. A presence that nudges and invites, a presence that fills our imagination with hopes and dreams. A presence that is our advocate and counselor...

The apostle Paul talks about the fruits of the spirit being: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...

If I were to summarize all this, I'd just say, it is the Holy Spirit that shapes us into loving, kind and gracious people. The outcome of sanctification, where the rubber hits the road, is all about being loving, kind and gracious people.

Quick story... One of the privileges of being in ministry is being invited into people's lives. I love visiting, and meeting with people in hospitals and nursing homes. Being with people in all sorts of circumstances. Listening to their stories and praying with them. It's always an honor and a privilege...

I could write a book about the different people and experiences. Let me share a few...

There was Agnes... She was over a hundred years old before she passed away. She lived in an assisted living apartment. She had been a teacher. I would knock on her door, and she would open it with a huge smile on her face. If I ever had to paint a picture of Agnes, I'd have to paint a halo over her head. She just radiated love and compassion.

She would grab my hands and literally pull me into her little room and have me sit down... Then she would start asking how my day was going and how the family was doing... She was genuinely caring and concerned about me. Spending an hour with Agnes was like ten minutes. You felt like you mattered. She was loving, kind and gracious... She was simply, life giving.

There was my friend, John... I keep a picture of John in my bible. He lived with diabetes since he was a kid. He also was a teacher and a proud Scot. Near the end of his life, he had entered hospice and wanted to do some funeral planning. So, I met with him and his wife...

He thought it would be appropriate for someone play the bag pipes at his funeral. Then he had a great idea, "Heck, why don't we get someone to play the bag-pipes now, while I'm still alive!" And so, that's exactly what we did!

We found someone from the Twin Cities, brought him down, and gathered a whole bunch of people on a Saturday afternoon... It was a joyous occasion! John was beaming and tearful and surrounded by great friends.

He was in very poor health, but that day it didn't matter. And that's the picture in my bible, sitting with John at that bag-pipe recital... And he passed away two days later, full of hope and confidence in the resurrection. At the funeral, there were a ton of people... He had touched a lot of lives. John was a loving, kind and gracious person. He was simply life giving...

There was Mary... she was a hundred and four when she passed away and one of the wisest people I've ever met. She was a career nurse, and had a way of listening to others and being compassionate. She lost her husband when she was young, after ten years of marriage and four kids... She raised the whole family by herself and she would give credit to the church. She would tell stories of how her kids grew up in the church.

She would also tell stories of being a Sunday School teacher and how important all the church kids were to her. She kept track of many of them! She would write them cards and letters; she would encourage them. That was her ministry! Mary was a loving, kind and gracious person. She was simply life giving...

You know people like this... They sit next to you in worship, and you see them every day, working in the fields, working in the hospitals, the schools, the businesses, hanging out at coffee shops, loving one another, caring for each other... And just like you... finding ways to connect and include...

We are congregations of loving, kind and gracious people... And as the Body of Christ together, we forgive one another as we have been forgiven. And in that way, we are new creation, we rise from the dead.

And as Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And so, it is for us... Faith connects us to our very real everyday lives... We hear, after every service, "Go in Peace, serve the Lord. Thanks be to God." And that's exactly what we do! Amen ...