

**St. George's Cathedral, Kingston, Ontario
Pentecost, Sunday, June 9th, 2019
A Pentecost Parable
Eric Friesen**



Dove, Pablo Picasso, Print, #9, Tate Gallery, UK

It's the Day of Pentecost, a feast day for the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples after Jesus' Ascension, and therefore the arrival of the Holy Spirit to all the rest of us, for all time ever after. The Holy Spirit, the Advocate, who will not leave us comfortless, the Spirit of truth.

I don't want to take too long a detour from a personal Pentecost Parable that

I want to share with you this morning, but I feel I have to make a short one. Earlier this year, it was big news when the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, was quoted as saying that he prays in tongues, every morning when he says his prayers at 5 AM to start the day. It was part of a longer interview for an evangelical TV station in London, part of the Premier communications group, and then picked up by the Guardian and the BBC and others. As you may know, Archbishop Welby comes out of the charismatic tradition of our Church and so for him this idea of praying in tongues is no big deal.

He said this as part of a huge prayer effort he and the Archbishop of York began in 2016, called “Thy Kingdom Come.” A prayer movement which began in the Anglican Church and has now spread to many other major denominations as well - Catholic, Orthodox, Methodist and more. It’s a global wave of prayer, running every year from Ascension Day to today, Pentecost, 11 days, in which each individual who joins it is asked to pray for 5 people they know they they may become Christians. But it was the “praying in tongues” part that caught the secular media’s attention.

And today, as we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, we consider again that day when the great wind rushed through the room where the disciples were meeting, and tongues of fire appeared over their heads, as a visible manifestation of the Holy Spirit. I spent a long time looking for a painting or an image of this important event in Scripture to put on the cover of our bulletin this morning, but found none that I felt expressed my conception of Pentecost. Many of them for me are just plain kitsch. So I chose Pablo Picasso’s beautiful black and white print of a dove instead, just a dove,

which is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit descending on us. I wanted a less hysterical image of the Spirit, as I will get to in a moment.

But back to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Archbishop Welby is a serious and gifted leader of our church, and I don't think of him as what we used to describe as a holy roller, but on this issue of speaking or praying in tongues, I am a sceptic. I am not opposed to those whose spiritual life involves ecstatic experiences of this kind, but it is neither my tradition nor my inclination. Susan and I once went to hear the evangelist Jimmy Swaggart in a hockey arena in Minneapolis. **That** was an experience, including my first of people being moved to speak in tongues. What I remember is that it all sounded like yodeling without singing. I was transfixed, but not convinced.

I prefer my spiritual ecstasy to come from A Bach Prelude and Fugue, a Tallis anthem, singing the Old Hundredth with a congregation in full voice, or a moment in nature like I had just the other day, when an indigo bunting flashed its iridescent colours at me in the new green of our garden, and I felt a rush of conviction that this glory of nature had just given me a glimpse of the eternal, a flash of God's majesty, an angel of the Divine, the Holy Spirit.

Remember that we began our readings today with the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis. A story that symbolizes the fracturing of people on earth into a disparate, uncommunicating "babel" of languages. Well, my understanding of what happened on the Day of Pentecost was that now the barriers were broken down, and everyone can hear and understand the good news in their own language. As Kathleen Norris points out, Pentecost has reversed the ill effects of that Babel moment. The Day of Pentecost, the day

the Christian Church was founded, offering a faith for all peoples on earth, a day of harmony, the harmony of a common faith. Not the personal tongues of glossalalia, speaking in tongues, but the actual languages that all of us on earth, speak.

In the Episcopal Prayer Book, the first one I owned, in the Proper Preface for Pentecost, the American Church added a sentence, which I think is important.

The Preface reads: “Through Jesus Christ Our Lord. In fulfillment of his true promise, the Holy Spirit came down on this day from heaven, lighting upon the disciples, to teach them and to lead them into all truth; (and this is the added sentence): *uniting peoples of many tongues in the confession of one faith*, and giving to your Church the power to serve you as a royal priesthood and to preach the Gospel to all nations.”

That is certainly how I understand what happened on that first Pentecost. Uniting peoples of many tongues in the confession of one faith. A good addition to Cranmer, I would think.

My own understanding of how the Holy Spirit works was prompted by an essay by the American novelist and writer Anne Lamott, who is so funny and so honest in her writing about her own wrestling with Christian belief and the practice of her faith. She is such a breath of fresh air in the land of spiritual writing. In her second book on faith, called *Grace (Eventually)*, she describes an experience which she refers to as “the Holy Spirit snatch, when something inside you clears its throat, tugs on your sleeve or actually takes

the wheel.” It’s not the most elegant description of how the Holy Spirit might work, but its vivid. And now I will tell you my own story, my own experience with a “Holy Spirit snatch.” My Pentecost Parable:

It was the fall of 1987. We had been living in Minnesota for 3 years, and for much of that time attending a large Presbyterian Church in St. Paul. It was a large, wealthy, important church, the church of Hubert Humphrey among others. It had a great music program which our children were part of, and a speakers bureau with people like Henry Kissinger coming to speak on a Sunday morning. Gradually, for me at least, it was not spiritually satisfying. And I began looking elsewhere, as I had been doing for years, even before we moved to Minnesota. One Sunday morning, alone in the car - Susan was tired of my church shopping - I was heading from St. Paul to Minneapolis. I had been told to try the big Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, that it was a better option. About a third of the way down Interstate 94 that connects the Twin Cities, at the very last second I veered off onto the Dale Avenue exit, turned left and drove into an old part of St. Paul. Some months previous I had been to a small Episcopal Church there for a baroque concert, and that’s where I now headed. The Church was called St. Clements Episcopal. I walked in, and almost immediately felt at home. It was not at all what I had been led to believe, that the Episcopal Church was the Republican Party at prayer. The music, the liturgy, the sermon, the Rector, the greeters at the door, the people in the pews, the exquisite English country church architecture complete with a lychgate, all seemed to reach out to me, saying, welcome home, this is where you belong. Not too long after I convinced my family to come with me and they too came to feel it was their spiritual home.

That was the beginning of my becoming an Anglican, which culminated in our formal joining the Church in May 1988. It was almost as Anne Lamott describes it. As if the Holy Spirit actually took the wheel of my car, and made me take the Dale Avenue Exit instead of heading further west to Minneapolis, and chauffeured me to St. Clement's Episcopal. I believe that, absolutely. That's how I understand the Holy Spirit works within us. In my case, the Holy Spirit recognized that I was ready to go "home" and rescued me from a restless search and led me to the place where my soul and heart and mind would feel completely at home.

Yes a naysayer could try to refute me. Saying that the idea of going to the Episcopal Church just came to me as a random mental flash as I was driving in the general vicinity that Sunday morning. But I can tell you, when I set out I had No intention of going anywhere but Westminster Presbyterian in Minneapolis. I am convinced, no, I **know** that it was a force other than my own brain that, seconds before I passed the Dale St. exit, the Holy Spirit took the wheel and guided me on a different route. A route that led to my being received into the Anglican church, a route that changed my life dramatically, and for the better.

I think that many of us here this morning could point to something similar, a choice made, an experience that has no rational explanation. I was talking to a Toronto friend recently about this. She's been an Anglican since childhood. My friend remembered, as a young woman, some 40 or 50 years ago, being in London, England. One day, going down the second escalator deep into the bowels of the Piccadilly Circus Tube station. She was just gazing at the ads along with walls as she was descending. And suddenly she

experienced an overwhelming surge of love, a feeling that she was loved, by God. She has no idea why it happened there, and then, but she says it's a feeling that has never left her. And of course moved her to love God in return.

I don't believe we have to speak in tongues in order to experience the power of the Holy Spirit, although again I say I'm not denying its validity for others. We can experience it in the most unlikely places, like an escalator in a tube station, or in the car on the way to somewhere we never end up because the Spirit has taken over the wheel. We can experience it in the glory of nature, of seeing a butterfly light on the arm of a lawn chair on a summer's day, or a hummingbird dart from flower to flower. For T S Eliot it was a "moment in the rose garden, the moment in the arbour where the rain beat, the moment in the draughty church at smokefall. Or when the light falls on a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel."

For me, now, one of my most spiritual moments in a service is moving towards the railing to take communion. A quiet, solemn, liturgical moment, joining my friends and fellow parishioners, humming or singing the hymn to myself, a holy and intimate and quiet moment when we meet God in the bread and the wine. That's where I most often now feel the Holy Spirit, as a spiritual companion. This is why ritual and music is so important, because it opens our minds, our hearts, our spirit to God's presence, physically, here, now, always. Amen.