

On Ascension Day, I offered a short guide to prayer for the nine days before today, the Day of Pentecost, or Whitsunday. Just as Jesus ascends into heaven he tells his followers: “*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” And so, the disciples and Mary, the mother of Jesus, spend the next nine days in prayer, gathered in a room, waiting, wondering, could these words possibly have any truth to them. And then it happens, the Spirit descends, something nearly beyond description.

Hmmm, here we are, gathered in one place. Last week, I asked people at coffee hour to take a piece of paper with one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit that Paul enumerates in the Letter to the Galatians, write it on the poster board and decorate it in whatever way your wish. And here we are, surrounded by this marvelous array of representations of the Spirit’s work: There’s Love over here and Joy over there. Kindness and Generosity, Peace, Gentleness, and Faithfulness, Patience, and Self-Control (with a big chocolate chip cookie!).

Holy Scripture is of course full of images of the Spirit: mighty wind, vision-bestower, fire – tongues of fire, prophecy instigator, breath, strengthener, giver of new languages, comforter, dream-maker, advocate (defense lawyer), dove.

This Sunday, we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit onto and into the first apostles, the act that transformed them from fearful Galilean peasants energizing them and sending them out with courage to spread the Good News of Jesus. The story of Pentecost in Acts 2 emphasizes two images: wind and fire. The wind of the Spirit comes into the house of fear where the apostles were gathered, and sets them afire to be a light to the world.

In his letters, Paul speaks about the many gifts that the Holy Spirit pours out on the Church and on individual Christians. These gifts are of great variety: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, various tongues, interpretation of tongues. And Paul also points out that every gift is given, not for individual good or self aggrandizement, but for the common good of the whole church community. In that sense, then, every gift of the Spirit is given to build up the community, rather than primarily for the good of the individual believer.

Paul makes it abundantly clear that the Spirit gives *every* Christian gifts, and intends *every* Christian to respect and honor the gifts of every other Christian. He uses the analogy of members of the body (e.g., foot, hand, ear, eye) to assert that every Christian needs every other Christian within the Body of Christ, and that

each gift – whether the gift of that Christian is weak or strong, honorable or not-so-much – it is of value and to be honored. In fact, Paul argues, the weaker and less honored gifts should be treated with greater respect and honor.

In I Corinthians 13, Paul reveals that though every gift is valuable, there is particular value to three gifts: faith, hope, and love – and that love is the greatest gift of all. The word he uses for love is the Greek word *agape* – no strings attached, unconditional, unselfish love. This love – the sort of love God has for all Creation – brings forth many fruits in those who are able to receive it and nurture it: patience, kindness, lack of jealousy and boastfulness, lack of arrogance and rudeness, lack of demanding its own way, lack of irritability and resentment, lack of rejoicing at wrong. Love is able to bear, believe, hope and endure all things. In Galatians, Paul also sets forth another list of the Spirit's fruits: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. All of which brings us to these posters on the walls. Take a look.

What are the implications for the Church and particularly for us at St. Thomas when we live into and practice these gifts? Well, I believe that for the Church to thrive – and for St. Thomas's to thrive as a parish – Paul's admonitions about respecting and honoring all gifts is essential. This means that within the Body there is to be no hierarchy of more important and less important gifts. No ranking of parishioners who are of more value or less value. Every gift, and the stewarding of that gift, is of equal importance.

Keeping this in mind will be of particular importance as we continue to focus on building a strong foundation for our future life together. Take a look at these gifts of the Spirit: Which one is easiest for you? Which one is hardest? Is there one of these gifts that you desire to have more of its attributes? When you come to receive the Body and Blood of our Lord, quietly ask for this gift that you too may use it to build up this community in declaring the Good News. May the Holy Spirit set us on fire that we too may be a light to the world!

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