

Lex orandi, lex credendi: a three-week preaching series on worship and faith

The Rev. Richard M. Simpson, Rector, St. Francis Church

Part II – Fed (Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2010)

This weekend, with Christians across town and around the world, we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. Unlike Christmas and Easter, when we are enmeshed in secularized versions of these holy days, I have seen no Pentecost displays at Big Y or CVS. But here at St. Francis, it's a big weekend with lots of seemingly disparate things happening—all of them connected by that same life-giving Spirit that we heard about in today's reading from Acts. On Saturday night: the celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism as Paige Nicole Parker is welcomed into the household of God. On Sunday morning: the celebration with our young people who have gone through our Eucharist Instruction program. Across town at the Lutheran and Congregational Churches (and in many denominations that don't require the bishop's presence) Pentecost includes Confirmation, which we celebrated just two weeks ago. This weekend we also will mark the graduation of those who have completed four years of study in the Education for Ministry program.

All of these are the work of God's Holy Spirit by which we are claimed and sealed and marked as Christ's own, forever, in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Baptism is not magic. It's not like getting our kids vaccinated or buying fire insurance. *Rather, it's is the beginning of a journey with the Holy Spirit and with God's people, the Church.* Sometimes that Spirit is experienced as a Comforter—like a gentle summer breeze. And sometimes that same Spirit is like a mighty wind that stirs us from complacency. Sometimes that same Spirit is like a flickering flame that illumines the darkness and sometimes like an all-consuming fire. Episcopalians tend to like the kinder and gentler ways that the Spirit works and you probably know Christians who experience the Spirit as louder. But it's all the work of the same Spirit. We may choose to *ignore* the work of that Spirit for months or years or decades at a time, but we cannot negate the Spirit's presence in our lives. The journey toward more mature discipleship that leads us through Church School and Rite 13 and J2A and Confirmation and EfM is ultimately about learning to trust that Spirit to be our guide as we continue to grow into the full stature of Christ.

It is important for us to be clear that we aren't making Paige into an Episcopalian this weekend. That may or may not happen at some point down the road. But she is not being baptized as an Episcopalian. We at St. Francis Church are acting on behalf of Christ's one holy, catholic and apostolic Church; as we do that, we pray not only for her and her family, but for ourselves, so that we can be the kind of faith community that will make it apparent that the Holy Spirit is at work here and is present in our worship and is forming us as Christians and in our sense of purpose and mission in the world. We are trying to become what C.S. Lewis once called "mere Christians" and we pray this weekend that we might be the kind of faith community that is focused on making faithful disciples.

Baptism is a life-long journey that begins at the font, but it doesn't end there. Each week we are invited to come to the Table to become what we eat by renewing the promises that were made at Baptism, because Baptism is a two-way street and it calls for a response in us as living members of Christ's Body. For most of the young people who have gone through our Eucharist Instruction program, therefore, this weekend is not their *first* Communion: they have been receiving the Sacrament for various lengths of time, some for as long as they can remember. But over the past few months, with their parents' help, they have been reflecting more deeply on what it means to be part of a Eucharistic community, what it means to be fed and nurtured by God as we become what we eat—the Body of Christ.

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Last weekend we reflected on how we are gathered as God’s holy people when we pray the Collect for Purity. Today we turn our attention to the Paschal mystery in order to consider what it means to be fed. At the heart of the Eucharistic Prayer, we proclaim this mystery of faith: *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.*

Yesterday I had the opportunity to bake the bread for this weekend’s services with this year’s class. As we taste and see today that the Lord really is good, this Pentecost weekend gives all of us a chance to step back to reflect on what we do and why we do it when we celebrate this Eucharist together. *We come with joy, with Christians far and near, to find as all are fed, the new community of love, in Christ’s communion bread.* If we understand that much about the Eucharist—if we understand enough to respond, “thank you God” –then we understand much. The heart of what this meal is all about is gratitude, for the Greek word εὐχαριστέω literally means, “to give thanks.” With the psalmist, we look to God to satisfy our hungry hearts—and God does. God feeds us with God’s own Body, and being fed we offer our sacrifice of thanks and praise.

Depending upon which Eucharistic Prayer we are using on a given week, the words change slightly. In Eucharistic Prayer B we say: *we remember his death, proclaim his resurrection, and await his coming in glory.* But it’s the same claim that is made in all of them, regardless of the wording: namely that we have a past, present, and a future with Christ. And behind these words are stories: particularly the narratives of Good Friday, Easter Day, and the Last Day.

First, the Eucharistic Prayer invites us to remember Christ’s death. Every time we gather to celebrate Holy Communion, we remember those three holy days that began in an Upper Room: Jesus and his closest followers are in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, and it came time for the Seder meal. Jesus, as he is portrayed in the gospels, spends a lot of time at table. But this meal will turn out to be the last supper that he and his friends will share together.

You don’t have to listen very closely to any of the Eucharistic prayers to find this thread running through all of them. In fact, for many of us who are older than forty or so, it was almost exclusively this thread we were taught to think about when we were children, regardless of whether we were raised as Baptists or Episcopalians or Roman Catholics. The focus was on what happened the next day—on the death of Jesus and the Cross. And so we pray: *He stretched out his arms upon the cross and offered himself, in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.*

This is a vital part of the story, but it’s not the whole story. When we celebrate the Eucharist we are not simply continuing the practice of sharing a Seder meal. We are also proclaiming Christ’s resurrection: *Christ is risen.* And that verb tense matters. We don’t say that Christ *was* risen, but that He *is*. Every Eucharist is a recollection of Christ’s victory over sin and death that calls us to new and abundant life. As Brian Wren puts it in one of his great Easter hymns: *Christ is alive, let Christians sing! No longer bound to distant years in Palestine he comes to claim the here and now!*

When we break the bread and share the cup we are not going back in time to an Upper Room: we are “on the road to Emmaus” (or on our way to Worcester or the prom or a new job or to the hospital.) We are asking for God to open our eyes and ears and hearts and minds so that we can

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see that Christ is here, among us wherever two or three gather together in His name. And so we pray: *risen Lord, be known to us in the breaking of the bread!* The Eucharist is not just about remembering that Christ died on the Cross; it's about celebrating the good news of Easter—that even now, Christ is with us.

But there is also a future-tense to this meal: it's a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. The Eucharist anticipates the culmination of human history—we await Christ's coming in glory when every tear is wiped away and pain and grief are no more. At some level that first Pentecost in Jerusalem, even without bread and wine, is a glimpse into what that end looks like: a place where each can speak in her own native tongue and be heard, from many tribes from many nations. (Heaven is not an English-only place!) This yearning for God's future kingdom is also woven into the fabric of the Eucharistic Prayer: we are called to serve Christ in unity, constancy and peace until "...at the last day, we are brought with all the saints into the joy of God's eternal kingdom."

All of this raises the question of how we should pray the Eucharistic Prayer: what posture should be used? Traditionally, one stood for praise and thanksgiving and knelt for confession. So if the Eucharistic Prayer is understood to be primarily about penitent hearts and forgiveness, then kneeling seems to be the right answer. We gather *to remember Christ's death upon the cross, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world*, as the older liturgies put it (BCP 334) We kneel, mindful that *we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under the table.* (BCP 337) Which is true; but it's only about one third of the truth.

We come with joy: because we are forgiven, loved, and free. *We have been delivered from evil and made worthy to stand before God* (BCP 368)—which is simply to say that Christ's victory on Easter morning is a cause for celebration! *Christ is risen!* You don't kneel at a party where the fatted calf has been killed and the table is set with veal piccata and a lovely Tuscan red wine! And beyond that, we look over the horizon to the Last Day, which is often compared in Scripture to a wedding feast. Most wedding receptions, including the one Jesus attended in Cana of Galilee, are joyous celebrations meant not for kneeling but for dancing!

Now the *Prayerbook* doesn't order us to stand, and let's be clear: neither does the rector of St. Francis Church! There may be times when the only posture we can take is to be humbly kneeling. But over the past thirty or forty years (since the revisions were being considered and then made to the *Prayerbook* in 1979), that has become the *preferred* posture, not only in this parish but in the wider church—as it was the preferred posture in the earliest centuries of the Church's life. In part this change is rooted in the recovery of these other dimensions of the Paschal mystery. Standing is therefore encouraged—and when we stand we stand together, which is also a good reminder that we are not Christians alone, but in community.

Whether we choose on any given week to stand or kneel, we all proclaim with one voice the mystery of faith: *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.* As we try to envision the day when every tear is wiped away, it is in that imaginative enterprise that we begin to discover the work God has given us to do—and then we are sent out to do it. But that's for next weekend...