

ASCENSION 2017

Acts 1:1-11 *You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit*

Psalms 47 *"God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord"*

Ephesians 1:17-23 *May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ give you a Spirit of wisdom*

Matthew 28:16-20 *Go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you*

*♪♪ Make me a channel of your peace, where there is hatred let me bring your love.
Where there is injury, your pardon, Lord, and where there's doubt, true faith in you.
Make me a channel of your peace, where there's despair in life let me bring hope,
Where there is darkness, only light, and where there's sadness, ever joy. ♪♪*

That prayer - which we call the prayer of St. Francis - was not exactly written by him. He never said or wrote those words in Italian or French. But, in a way, the song is about him, it is about his life - he wrote those words with his life. He was truly someone who was baptized in the Holy Spirit, the way Jesus promised just before his Ascension.

How many of you have been baptized? How many have received Confirmation?
Have you been baptized in the Holy Spirit?

Like the apostles, like Mary, the mother of Jesus, like Mary Magdalene, like St. Francis, all of us have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But we do not always let that Spirit flow freely through us

to make us channels of peace, pardon, faith, hope, love & joy.

Sometimes we hear the words "Baptism in the Holy Spirit" and think of Pentecostals or charismatics, and think *"I'm not one of them"* or *"I have that power, because I have been baptized in the Holy Spirit."* Neither response is completely true.

I was prayed over to be baptized in the Holy Spirit in 1972 at Notre Dame, where I was studying in the summer. It was a month before I was ordained. On that day, I did not feel anything special, and was not aware of receiving any particular gifts of the Spirit, but later on I experienced the power of the Spirit many times in the course of my life & ministry. Those gifts came to me when I needed them, but never as something I possessed or had control of.

Just this past week I experienced the presence of Christ and the call to teach someone what he taught. I received a phone call from a woman I had known since the time I directed High School musicals right after my ordination. Over 20 years ago, she had suffered the loss of her 16 year old son, who died in a car accident at the age of 16. She was still in great pain because of that loss, and I felt totally powerless to say anything that would comfort her.

Then I remembered that I had been just as powerless to say a healing word at her son's memorial service, which was attended by his family, many members of his school & it seemed like the whole community he was part of.

I called on God to work through me as I shared the pain of his parents & his sister. At that moment, the Spirit gave me a story to tell - & I was filled, or rather immersed in the Holy Spirit. I became a channel of peace, light and healing - not by my own strength or gifts, but through the power of the Holy Spirit. My friend had been in great pain since her son's death, and felt powerless to heal herself, but she admitted her need for God by looking up my phone number and calling.

We have all received the same Holy Spirit. Both Baptism and Confirmation are sacraments - living, effective signs of that truth. The Greek word for baptism means to be immersed or filled. But we have not yet been fully baptized in the Holy Spirit until we have allowed ourselves to be channels of the gifts of that Spirit. What I have come to understand about the words of Jesus in the Acts, and other parts of the New Testament, is that the gift of baptism in the Holy Spirit is not so much something that comes to us from the outside. It is not a re-baptism, the way some traditions see it. It is the RELEASE of a spirit that has already come to us as a free gift - to many of us when we were infants and were powerless to earn it or deserve it. The gifts that come from the Spirit are released when I let go of having control, when I admit that I am powerless and let the Spirit flow through me.

Then I become a channel of peace and healing and comfort.

You have already been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. Think of the times when you have felt powerless & not in control - and God worked through you to support or serve or bless someone else. Think of the times you were in need, and God blessed you through an unlikely person or situation. Those are the times when you have experienced the promise of Jesus that we would be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

The first disciples of Jesus sometimes resisted letting themselves be powerless enough to let this happen. In the 1st reading they ask, "*Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*" What they were asking was something like, are you going to give us the control, the power to rule over others? They were blocking the power of God by holding on to control. The same thing happened in the Gospel when we read, "*they worshipped, but they doubted.*" They wanted to understand the ways of Christ and the Spirit and so have all the answers.

But sometimes, as in the case of the senseless death of a healthy young person, or the tragic deaths of those who went to a concert in England this past week, there are no answers for those whose loved ones have been killed or injured. It is precisely then that we need to receive the power of the Spirit. In fact, the power of the Resurrection, the power and grace Jesus promised at his Ascension, will not flow freely through us until we let go of control and are powerless.

This Eucharist is an opportunity to allow the spirit already given to us to be released. It is a chance to let go of control in the face of guilt, shame, deep wounds & even death. I pray that the prayer St. Francis lived might be answered in each of our lives, and in the life of this community, this gifted branch of the vine which is the Body of Christ.

*♪♪ Make me a channel of your peace, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
In giving of ourselves that we receive, and in dying that we're born to eternal life. ♪♪*