

Today our church calendar starts to shift.

On this last Sunday of Easter

our lessons turn away from resurrection appearances

and toward the coming of the Holy Spirit,

the Holy Comforter that Jesus promises will watch over us

when he goes to be with the Father.

Next Sunday we hear the story of Pentecost,

but today we're invited to look for the Spirit leading the Church

not just 2,000 years ago, but now.

We start in John's gospel, in the time when Jesus is still with his disciples.

Jesus is with his disciples in the Upper Room,

praying his final prayer before he walks outside to be arrested.

John tells us that Jesus looked up to heaven and said these words:

“Father, the hour has come....I am coming to you.

Protect in your Name those whom you have given me,

so that they may be one, as we are one.”

Later in that same prayer Jesus asks God to protect

not just those with him that night

but those who will believe in the future. That's you and me.

So in that Upper Room,

gathered with his disciples just before he is taken to his death,

Jesus prayed for you.

Prayed for God to watch over you, to protect you,

and prayed that we all might be one.

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It's easy to focus on how we fall short of Jesus' prayer.

It's easy to see our divisions, our failings, our hypocrisy.
And we can't look away from that.
Ignoring brokenness allows more of it to happen.

But it's also important to see how Jesus' prayer
continues to bear fruit in the world,
how followers of Jesus continue to reach for unity,
for cooperation and sharing.

It happens at the highest levels, like 3 weeks ago
when Sarah Mullally, the new Archbishop of Canterbury,
sat down with Pope Leo XIV.

But mostly it happens at the local level,
like right here at Holy Trinity every time DEAM opens its doors.
DEAM is the embodiment of Jesus' prayer that we all may be one.

DEAM is one of thousands, maybe millions, of places,
all around the world, big and small,
where churches with all different kinds
of doctrines, practices, and histories
pool their money together to be more effective
at helping our neighbors.
And they do it in the Name of Christ.

Jesus' prayer isn't fully realized, but it hasn't been defeated, either,
and if Romans 8 is to be believed,
Jesus continues to intercede, to pray - for us -
"that we all may be one."

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In Acts this morning Jesus ascends into heaven,
but before he does he makes the disciples a promise:

He says, “When the Holy Spirit comes upon you,
you will be witnesses to the ends of the earth.”

Acts tells us that as soon as Jesus ascended,
the disciples began devoting themselves to prayer
and sharing what they had with those in need.

So two of the ways the Spirit led followers of Jesus
to bear witness to the Gospel from the very beginning
were devotion to prayer and sharing with those in need.

Now if you’ve read Acts closely
you know that HOW the first disciples shared their possessions
was pretty amazing and inspiring.
It was very different from how most of us live our lives.

But just because a church’s life doesn’t look the same as it did in Acts 2
doesn’t mean it isn’t faithful to Jesus,
and definitely doesn’t mean the Holy Spirit isn’t leading it.

Very few of us here were born and raised at Holy Trinity.
We come from a LOT of different kinds of churches.
Places with different theologies, different types of leadership,
places that were better than Holy Trinity in some ways
and not as good in others.

But I'll bet that every church or parish we come from
did what the first followers of Jesus did in Acts,
and what we do at Holy Trinity -
you listened for the Holy Spirit, you devoted yourselves to prayer,
you shared with one another and with those in need.

Despite all the good, bad, and different ways of being church,
the Holy Spirit is still helping us bear witness to the ends of the earth.

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When First Peter was written, the church had been around a few years.
They had gone through some hard times together
and Peter had a strange word of comfort for them:
“If you are reviled for the Name of Christ,” he said,
“you are blessed, because the Spirit of God is resting on you.”

In this country it's rare for someone to be reviled for the Name of Christ.
Not unheard of, and certainly our history is full of people
who have been reviled or worse
for trying to follow the teachings of Jesus.

So I'm not saying we're better than anybody else.
But thank God, in this country it's rare to be reviled
just for holding the Name of Christ.

That reality is not true all across the world.
There are too many places where Christians continue to suffer
abuse, violence, and even death simply for their faith in Jesus.

There's a publication called The Living Church
that covers news related to Anglican Christianity across the globe,
and in recent years they have stepped up their coverage
of violence against Christians.

This week there was a story about the murder of a priest
named Emmanuel Ezeokwe on April 22nd.

Fr. Emmanuel was killed in NE Nigeria by armed gunmen
when they broke into his house just after midnight.
This was part of a series of attacks against Christians.

1st Peter tells us that the Holy Spirit was with Fr. Emmanuel that night,
just as surely as the Spirit was with St. Stephen 2,000 years ago
when our first martyr was stoned by his own brothers.

I think Peter is right. The Holy Spirit was with them both.

God will never abandon you, especially when everyone else has.
I ask you to remember in your prayers Fr. Emmanuel
and all those in this world who face violence for their faith.

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Next week churches all around the world will remember and celebrate
the day when the Holy Spirit came to rest
on the heads of the disciples.

Today, let us give thanks that the Spirit is still moving in the world,
is still helping us pray and love and give,
is still helping us endure violence and rejection,
and is still helping us inch just a little bit closer
to Jesus' prayer for us: that we all may be one.

Amen.