

A sermon preached by the Revd RL Ficks III at Church of the Good Shepherd, Houlton, Maine on the Day of Pentecost (6/9), 2019

Acts 2:1-11; Romans 8:14-17; John:14:8-17

Do you recall the wonderful character Flip Wilson used to render...a voluptuous and most forward woman named Geraldine? How I used to laugh whenever Geraldine did her thing...which was, inevitably, to behave badly and outrageously, and then, when caught up short, to look straight at the camera with horrified gaze and in a startled voice to protest that, "The devil made me do it."

It is a marvelous rendition of the belief that something outside of us, for want of a better word, the devil, has the power to make us do those things that are wrong and destructive to the dignity of our humanity. It is a notion that originated millennia ago, and, even to today, as the Great Litany is read, we pray that we might be defended from "the world, the flesh, and the devil."

That which is bad comes from outside us. It allows us to, with Geraldine, have something to blame for our failures...something that rebels against what we want to be our decent and good inherent nature. It is not a choice we make...but a force that works upon us.

Today, however, on this feast of Pentecost...πενηντα...fifty...fifty days after Easter...we mark and celebrate the gift to the Church of the Holy Spirit. It is the gift of that which nourishes...strengthens...empowers...its recipients to live in manners and modes that are in keeping with God's will for the creatures God has created and upon whom God has conferred a basic and essential dignity simply by nature of their creation.

This Holy Spirit...the conferring and presence of which is recounted in three different manners in the three different readings for today...is clearly, also, a force from outside of us.

As such...along with the force we have referred to as the devil...and recall, we are using human words and sounds to communicate massively complex notions when we talk about the Holy Spirit and the Devil...about good and evil...as such, the Spirit, too, comes from without...it exists in spite of us...not because of us.

Lest I make the grave blunder of trying to be terribly intellectual and philosophical...that is an endeavor better undertaken by bears of larger brain...let me be clear that the point I am driving at is that the presence in the world of good and evil...of the Holy Spirit and the Devil...suggests that, in fact, we do make choices regarding what takes precedence in our journeys. It supposes that there are forces both within and without that work at cross purposes...forces between which we must make choices.

Memorial Day was but two weeks ago...the 75th anniversary of D-Day but two days ago. We are wise again today to recall the choices made by men and women across the years which were costly and difficult.

Such choices suppose the acceptance of the power conferred in the Holy Spirit...power which allowed humans to do that which was good and valiant and brave...instead of that which was safe and self-serving and cowardly...in ancient words, of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

So, if we have these two forces at work, one might ask how we are to make right choices more than we make wrong choices...how we can become stronger in our reliance on the Holy Spirit and drawn from our tendency to give in to that which would defeat the Spirit.

I would suggest, in a world in which my sense is that we are moving, at an alarming rate, away from any recognizable reality of community, the task is a most difficult one. Community, as it has been known for millennia, is a group of people sharing...to a marked degree...their journeys...and seeking a common good providing the most benefit possible to the community's members...some of whom we may actually not care for very much.

I cannot conceive of where the massive strides we have made in the manner in which we communicate will take our grandchildren, but I am clear that for this generation, amidst all the blessing they have bestowed, the strides of the last fifty years have precipitated this move away from community.

We can communicate...but we cannot see or touch or smell each other. We can communicate...but we don't really have to put up with much we don't care for in another. We can communicate...but we never have to sit in meetings with other humans who annoy us and drop crumbs down their shirt. We can communicate...but we don't know each other. We can communicate...but we seldom bring our own offering of food and sit down with a community of others (though, my waist measurement attests to the fact that Church of the Good Shepherd does much to avoid this particular form of separation). We can communicate...but, too often, we just don't have time to get together.

None of this is meant to be condemnation...only commentary...but it leads me to suggest that...if we are willing to take seriously the possibility that we do have to make choices...day in and day out...and that there are forces that push us this way and that as we make those choices...we better take to heart the importance of seeking to respond to that force we believe seeks the greater good of the world.

I don't know exactly where such learning to respond is cultivated...but I do know it is very often in communities...not in isolation.

My grandmother, once, when confronted by the three of us grandchildren complaining, on a Saturday evening during our Summer holiday, that we thought it was unfair to have to go to church when we were on holiday, responded by urging each of us to draw a coal from the campfire we were sitting around in the backyard of our cottage in Michigan. She then had us sit quietly and watch what had once been a glowing, flaming, white-hot ember turn to red and darken to brown and, finally to blacken into a cooling hunk of ash. She then said quite simply, "We are like embers...and it is when we are in community, one with another, that we can stay alive and vital and burning with the fire of the Spirit. When we are pulled away into our own self-centered and private little worlds of enjoying and protecting ourselves...we begin to die."

The gift of the Spirit is worthy of celebration. How we go about choosing it as that which enlivens our very beings is perhaps reason for considerable reflection.