

Pentecost Sunday

Acts of the Apostles 2:1-11; 1Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13; Galatians 5:16-25; & John 20:19-23

It is admirable in our culture to be an influencer, a person with many followers on social media. Daily, scads of people check the “feed” of their influencers. It seems to me that influencers primarily indicate which styles, possessions or behaviors will help us get control over our lives. Influencing is nothing new: people have always followed those with charisma, regardless of substance. I often wonder about the possibilities for good that well aimed influence could accomplish. What if influencers talked, without any shade of self-promotion, about how to nurture understanding, dignity and community?

On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit transformed the disciples into influencers who did just that. With the ability to speak other languages, the disciples immediately connected with people from all over the known world and baptized over three thousand that day. Note the description of the disciples’ transformation: “They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.” All were filled, i.e. everyone had something to say. With each disciple speaking a different language, folks from “every nation under heaven” could learn about God’s life-giving love. Note too that the Spirit enabled them. The Holy Spirit, God-active-in-the-world, is the source of all our good. We must not lose sight of this; when we do, we end up disconnected, unable to understand each other. That is precisely what happened at the Tower of Babel (Gn 11:1-9), a prototypical story of humans striving to place themselves on a par with God and the resulting division. Pentecost is God’s remedy: God heals division and enables us to understand one another. In turn, we must use the gift of speaking remarkably only to grow community and that requires of us selfless love.

In 1Corinthians, Paul calls out influencers who have used another unusual gift of speech for division. At liturgy, some Corinthians burst forth in speech that made no sense. The Spirit had so filled them that they no longer spoke a human language. Weirdly awesome, right? It became problematic when those who had this gift declared it made them superior. So Paul writes, “to each individual the manifestation of the Spirit has been given for some benefit.” As in Acts 2, everyone has valuable gifts and the purpose of the gift is to benefit the community. When we lose sight of either fact, we stray far from the inspired Church of Pentecost, far from God’s desire for us.

Using our gifts selflessly is hard to do; this Sunday’s alternate second reading provides some helpful guidance. Paul first acknowledges that we struggle between acting selfishly (*of the flesh*) and acting for others (*of the Spirit*). “These are opposed to each other, so that you may not do what you want.” Even when we set out to be loving, our motives might actually be self-centered. We say in our heart, “Now they will love me more,” or “I will enjoy helping here.” Paul lists behaviors that indicate that we are *of the flesh*. They are self-indulgences, “individualistic behaviors”¹ we justify to ourselves and each other all the time. We shy away from the real work of loving, which includes loving those who hate us or are unpleasant to be around (Mt 5:44). Paul’s second list outlines “attitudes and actions that are considerate of others.” Note that the list begins with agape-love and ends with self-control: it is always about dignifying love, which cannot happen without self-control. Yes, this is difficult work, but God does not expect us to do it on our own. The Spirit is always available to us. Last point: Paul says the “works of the flesh” are plural but “the fruit of the Spirit” is singular. The flesh, i.e. selfishness, divides us while the Spirit always unites us interiorly and exteriorly.

As we ponder where to focus our energies post-pandemic, uniting love has to be our lodestar. John 20 tells us Jesus appeared on Easter night with the gifts of peace and the Holy Spirit who empowers us to reconcile. But the Spirit is not going to twist our arms; love cannot be forced upon us: we also have the power to retain sins, i.e. to refuse to reconcile. The Spirit has made us all influencers; let us aim to be community builders who only proclaim God’s life-giving love.

- ❖ Whom do you let influence you? Honestly, what is their goal? What is yours?
- ❖ How have you used your gifts this week to build understanding, dignity and community?

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¹ Quotes about both lists taken from “Galatians.” Ronald D. Witherup, P.S.S. *The Paulist Biblical Commentary*, 2018, p. 1397.