

Pentecost, May 15, 2016 – Baptism of Penelope Rose Hublar
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Acts 2:1-21, Romans 8:14-17, John 14:8-17

What is the Holy Spirit?

What a lot we have going on in worship today! Bells ringing, streamers waving, ladies dancing, descants rising, children jumping, children shouting, all different people standing up and speaking in different languages—and then after all of that, after the sermon, a baptism: Penelope Rose. What a great day for a baptism, this spirited Sunday, this Pentecost Sunday, this busy Sunday. As our music director and I were planning worship, I wondered, with all of this going on, how were we going to fit in a sermon, too? Well you can guess what's at the end of that conversation—when there's so much going on, what you could do with the sermon... Truthfully, all this activity: bodies moving, voices intersecting, music soaring, water pouring, all these things are just what the substance of worship should be on a day that attends to, and gives thanks for, the Holy Spirit.

What is the Holy Spirit? You may be excused if you are confused. You are not alone in this church if you wonder about the Holy Spirit: what it is, and why we don't talk about it more. And here I am adding to that. Here I am, on a Sunday with—yes—a short sermon, and the topic is something that already gets short shrift. Not by Pentecostal Christians, but maybe by Lutheran Christians, or maybe by straight laced, or maybe uptight, Christians...

In the three parts that are one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in the Holy Trinity, sometimes the Spirit gets the least attention. Sometimes, as a sort of explanation, it's said that the Spirit is the bashful one. I suppose that descriptor takes into account a lack of attention, but it does not take into account the actual nature of the Spirit—which is anything but bashful. On the contrary, as illustrated by the Acts reading, the Holy Spirit knows how to make an entrance! And as described in the Romans reading, the Holy Spirit is not bashful; it is not a spirit of fear that we receive. No, the Spirit that we receive is a spirit of adoption, a spirit that makes us all God's children, no matter what language we speak, no matter how we entered this country, God's Holy Spirit makes us sons and daughters. God's spirit makes sons and daughters prophecy, as is recorded in the prophet Joel. The Holy Spirit makes the young see visions, the old dream dreams. The Spirit's busy activity, the Spirit's boldness, almost impudence, the Spirit's seemingly whimsical, powerful audacity may be surprising, confusing, off-putting. Maybe that's why we don't talk about it more.

The truth is—and the Spirit is truth—the truth is that not one of us would be here, were it not for the Spirit. You thought you got here by car? Or because your mother or father made you? No, it was the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit who sparks plugs, who gets us moving. It's the Holy Spirit who inspires us to be loving parents, to bring children to be baptized, to pass on faith. It was the Holy Spirit who brought you here and it is the Holy Spirit that built this church. It wasn't just a bunch of Swedes, 100 years ago. I'm going to refrain here from a joke about how Swedes go about building things, and thus how we should marvel that this building is here. But there's a truth to the joke—the truth being that there is no way this church could be here, but for the Holy Spirit. No way those Swedes, and others, too, could then embark on another building project, the gym, during the Great Depression. No way, but for the Holy Spirit, who makes this happen, who builds and enlivens the church, just like in Jerusalem, just like today. No way we'd have any of this happening, but for the Holy Spirit.

No way we could be a church, but for the Holy Spirit, as good old Martin Luther says. Lutherans would do well to note the audacious attention given to the Spirit in Luther's explanation to the 3rd part of the creed. Luther says there's no way we could even believe in God, but for the Holy Spirit. But that the Spirit has called us, and enlightened us, and makes us holy, is keeping us true, is gathering us together, and forgiving us, and at the last will raise us all up—all of that, activity of the Holy Spirit. Because that's the real question, that's the real topic, that the grace of this day: not what the Spirit is, but what the Spirit does.