

Reflection on the Gospel- Pentecost Sunday Year A
(Acts 2:1-11; John 20:19-23)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Pentecost Sunday is often called the birthday of the Church. The earth itself features powerfully in the imagery associated with this feast: harvest, mountain, earthquake, thunder, fire. For the ancient Israelites, Pentecost (meaning ‘fiftieth’) was a harvest festival celebrated fifty days after the opening of the harvest. When the Jerusalem Temple was built, this harvest festival was transformed into a pilgrimage feast to celebrate the covenant that Israel had made with God on Mt Sinai. Several decades after the death of Jesus, the early Christians reflected on their origins and chose this feast to mark the birth of God’s new covenant with God’s people. In today’s first reading (Acts 2:1-11), Luke tells the new Pentecost story in symbolic language that evokes the story of Moses and the people of Israel receiving God’s Law on Mt. Sinai. Just as God’s presence to Israel was marked by earthquake and thunder and fire, so God’s Spirit enveloping the people of the new covenant in the upper room appears in a mighty rush of wind and tongues of fire. Luke’s account also evokes early rabbinic teaching that the voice of God on Sinai divided into seventy tongues and all the nations received God’s Law in their own tongue.

For the teaching at the heart of the new covenant, we turn to the gospel reading from John 20:19-23. The risen Christ appears to the disciples who are huddled behind locked doors. He offers the simple greeting: “Peace be with you,” the greeting we offer each other at every Eucharistic celebration. He sends them on a mission of peace in continuity with his own God-inspired mission. He breathes on them the gift of the Holy Spirit and tells them that God will forgive those whom they forgive, and will “retain” or “seize hold of” the transgressions of those whose sins or transgressions they “retain”. To seize hold of wrong-doing is to expose it and deal with it. Sometimes it is best to forgive and simply allow everyone to move on. In other situations, an easy amnesty only exacerbates the problem.

Much of the enduring conflict in our world derives from the inability of ordinary people and of both church and civic leaders to know how to deal with transgression. The Holy Spirit is the unique source of our capacity to deal with the perpetrators of violence. The Holy Spirit is likewise the source of our power to forgive, of our power to refrain from vengeance and our power to ensure restoration and healing. In our times, the earth itself cries out for forgiveness, for restoration and for healing. On this feast of the Holy Spirit, we might consider engaging in a “values inventory” by looking at how much of our personal and collective resources we invest in the things that make for peace.