

Pope Francis met with his cardinals to discuss a proposal from Benjamin Netanyahu, the leader of Israel. "Your Holiness," said one of the cardinals, "Mr. Netanyahu wants to challenge you to a game of golf to show the friendship and ecumenical spirit shared by the Jewish and Catholic faiths."

The Pope thought this was a good idea – but Pope Francis had never held a golf club in his hands. "Don't we have a Cardinal to represent me?" he asked.

"None who plays very well," a Cardinal replied. "But, there's a man named Jack Nicklaus, an American golfer who is a devout Catholic. We can make him a Cardinal. Then ask him to play Mr. Netanyahu as your personal representative. In addition, to showing our ecumenical spirit, we'll also win the match."

Everyone agreed it was a good idea. The call was made and of course, Nicklaus was honored and agreed to play.

The day after the match, Nicklaus reported to the Vatican to inform Pope Francis of the result. "I have some good news and some bad news, your Holiness," said Nicklaus.

"Tell me the good news first, Cardinal Nicklaus," said the Pope.

"Well, your Holiness, I don't like to brag, but even though I've played some pretty terrific rounds of golf in my life, this was the best I have ever played, by far. I must have been inspired from above. My drives were long and true, my irons were accurate and purposeful, and my putting was perfect. With all due respect, my play was truly miraculous."

"There's bad news?" asked the Pope.

"Yes, I lost by 3 strokes to Rabbi Tiger Woods." (email from Bill Freccia)

First, some background on the text from the ACTS OF THE APOSTLES. While Luke may seem to be casually giving us a simple rendition of the story of Pentecost, he has chosen each word with care. In the account of the descent of the Spirit, Luke begins by saying, "When the *time for Pentecost was fulfilled*, they were all in one place together" (Italics added). Luke is reminding us of the 9th chapter of his Gospel when he wrote of Jesus, 'When the *days for His being taken up were fulfilled*' (Lk 9:51), He resolutely set His face toward Jerusalem – the place of the cross. That period fulfilled everything Jerusalem symbolized. So now the next phase of salvation history was about to begin.

Luke also tells us in the first sentence of the reading that the disciples were all in one place together. As he makes that statement, he avoids giving particular details: He doesn't tell us what the place was, nor does he specify precisely to whom he was referring. The point of the setting is the togetherness, not their numbers or locale. They were doing what Jesus had commanded; they were waiting together.

The details of Luke's description of the Spirit set a series of flashbacks in motion. They are full of hints from the past about what was happening at the moment. Luke's use of a word related to the noun *pneuma*, to describe the noise that came from the sky and filled the house was an intriguing play on words. *Pneuma* can be defined as wind or spirit or breath. For the Jews -- who were more familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures than with references to the life of Jesus -- the noise, wind and fire reminded them of times when God had

appeared to Moses and Elijah (Exodus 19:16-19, 1 Kings 19: 11-12). For those who had walked with Jesus, the fire that came to rest over each of them could not but make them remember the Baptist's prediction that while his ritual just used water, the one to come after him would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire. (Lk 3:16)

Unless we pay careful attention, we can miss the irony in Luke's description of what happened next. Luke tells us that the disciples "began to speak in different tongues," and the diverse people hearing them "were confused" *because they understood them*. Luke wants us to ponder this fact: The Spirit enabled the disciples to proclaim, and the people were confused BECAUSE they understood them.

On one hand, this is a description of the 'miracle of tongues' – people who spoke various languages all understood the proclamation in their own language. On the other hand, it is a reminder that hearing the message of the Spirit can be both wondrous and confusing at the same time. While it all looks so simple in retrospect, neither the Spirit nor the gospel message ever leaves us just as we were; the Spirit throws us off balance and calls us into a newness that is somehow both joyful and disconcerting, understandable and confusing. (taken from Mary McGlone in CELEBRATION, 9 June 2019, p. 3)

OK, so what does Pentecost have to do with us? It is the Holy Spirit which enable us to be and to do those things which make us the church. We live effectively when we get 'the Church Thing' resolved. After the Church recognized and embraced the fundamental draw within each of them to be attached to other disciples. After they had endured all of the resolutions and 'whereas' clauses promulgated by international councils -- they recognized the only way to survive was obedience under Christ's key instruction "Go make disciples!" The history of the church is not flawless – but it bends toward grace. ALWAYS. Ezekiel spoke words of hope to a dispirited, desperate, confused and imperiled people. Because he had listened first to the promises of God, Ezekiel's words empowered the people to endure extraordinary hardship.

Pentecost reminds us of the eternal promises of God that underlie the 'Jesus Thing' and the 'Church Thing.' And we are part of both of these 'things' by the fact that we are here today. One of the eternal promises of God is not that life is simply long in duration but that life is good in its destination. God has infused the universe with a primal blessing. While the arc of the universe is long, it bends towards joyful goodness. This fills both the Creator and we human co-creators with joy, confidence, and hope. The Holy Spirit allows us to live and breathe within this joyful connection with God and with our neighbor. Another eternal promise of God is this: life not only endures, life is capable of transformation. This means that Christ's earthly mission of healing, mercy and resurrection are all directed toward the goal of making us fit for a relationship with God. A final promise of God is this: the arc of the spiritual universe is eternal and it bends toward vitality. The primary purpose of the Holy Spirit is to make us into vital people. ALIVE! HAPPY! EXCITED! NOT DEAD YET! Christ promised us this Spirit. Throughout time, vital congregations have exhibited this Spirit. St Andrew's, you do it here with Brown Bag Ministry, Family Promise, Western Wake Crisis Ministry, Oak City Cares, and so much more. When we live and breathe the message of Christ, it embraces US – and then empowers us. And the world is made a better place. (help from LECTONAID, Vol 17, #2, Year B, p. 62)

This is from a Church in Denver. They got the 'Church Thing' and the 'Jesus Thing.' This is what their bulletin said:

Married, divorced or single here, it's one family that mingles here.

Conservative or liberal here, we've all gotta give a little here.

Big or small here, there's room for us all here.

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Gay or straight, there's no hate here.

Woman or man here, everyone can serve here.

Whatever your race here, for all of us grace here.

In imitation of the ridiculous love Almighty God has for each of us and all of us, let us live and love without labels. (VANISHING GRACE, Philip Yancey, p. 76-77) I pray that we are 'getting the Jesus Thing' and 'The Church Thing' here at St. Andrew's. The Spirit is offered – always – we just have to receive it into our hearts so that we can live it out.

Third, Teilhard de Chardin once wrote: "The day will come, when after mastering the earth, the winds, the tides, and gravity, we shall harness for God, the energies of love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, we will have discovered fire." (ON LOVE AND HAPPINESS, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, p. 16)

Church, Gospel, Pentecost, Jesus – it's all about love. The fire of God's love for us, the fire of our love for God, and its expression in our love for one another – and all those in need. There is nothing else that is as important. For all of us. All the time. We will never make disciples of the world, as we are commanded to do, unless we love. It was the fact that the early Christians were known *for their love* that they converted the world. But it requires ALL of us.

ALL of us are baptized, and all of us are called to a life of service. We are partners in ministry, not consumers. If we are forever dealing with a laundry list of complaints about temperature, music and parking, and constantly checking everyone else's orthodoxy, we will never grow up enough to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Our worship on Sundays is not entertainment, and we are not the audience. Our faith is not about getting our dogma right – but getting our lives right. Worship is a time for us to gather, hear the word of God, get filled up on the Body & Blood of Christ, SO THAT in the power of the Spirit we can go out to change the world. If we go home and nothing changes, we should ask ourselves, why am I here? What's the point? (freely adapted from Donald Denton, LECTONAID, Mar-May 2015, p. 44)

I close with words from Rev. Rick Kirchoff as he addressed a congregation about Pentecost.

"When God sends forth the Spirit, amazing things happen: barriers are broken...communities are formed...opposites are reconciled....unity is established....disease is cured....addiction is broken....cities are renewed....races are reconciled....hope is established....people are blessed.....and church happens.

"Today the Spirit of God is present and we're gonna have church. So be ready....get ready.....God is up to something....discouraged folks, cheer up.....dishonest folks, 'fess up.....sour folks sweeten up.....closed folk, open up.....gossipers shut up.....conflicted folks make up.....non-givers, pay up.....sleeping folks wake up.....lukewarm folk, fire up.....dry bones shake up.....and pew potatoes stand up!

"But most of all.....Christ the Savior of all the world is lifted up." (C. King Duncan, DYNAMIC PREACHING, April-June 2015, p. 52-53) Let the Church say AMEN.