

THE COURTROOM ON THE LAWN  
The Day of Pentecost  
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May 23, 2021

Today, on this great Christian feast of Pentecost, we will leave behind the journey we were taking through the Book of Acts during Easter and turn to the Gospel of John for our sermon text. As I said at our outdoor service last Sunday, the energy of the two books, which have been read alongside each other every week since Easter Sunday, is very different; and while the enthusiastic, confident, extroverted spirit of Acts is certainly appropriate on the Day of Pentecost, so is the reflective, introverted mood of John. So, before we leave both books behind us for the rest of this year, let's allow the Gospel of John to give us a chance to look inside ourselves and reflect theologically on what our Easter journey with the Holy Spirit has been about.

As I sat with our Gospel text to prepare this sermon, I remembered my preaching professor's instruction to us: "Pay attention to what you had forgotten was in the text: the sermon may be right there." I had a powerful experience of this kind as I read Jesus' teaching about the Holy Spirit as John presents it. Listen again: "... when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgement, because the ruler of this world has been condemned." (John 16:8-11) The language of the Greek text is explicitly the language of a courtroom scene. The Holy Spirit will come and turn the world upside down by proving it wrong on three fundamental matters: sin, righteousness, and judgement.

So why did this jump out at me as if I were reading it for the first time? Let me take you back about forty years, to the summer of 1978, to a story I have told you before but in a very different context. I was a student at an orchestral training and conducting school in Maine, in my second summer after graduating from Oberlin with a degree in Trombone Performance. I was still working hard at that time to fight off a sense that where God really wanted me was in ministry. We students were housed with local families, and six of us young men lived for the summer with a retired army colonel, Colonel Hill, in his beautiful white Victorian home, with a great lawn that rolled almost to the sea. As the summer began, I was beginning to think that maybe I had eluded God. I would be making music in a beautiful place, I was young and strong and could run along the ocean road each evening, and I felt quite smug about all the religion and philosophy courses I had squeezed in along with my Trombone major, arming me, I thought, with arguments against a life of faith.

But God had a different plan for me that summer. Living with me at Colonel Hill's house was Mark, the principal cellist of our orchestra, who at thirty years of age was an elder statesman in our school. Mark was a Professor of Music at an Advent Christian college in Massachusetts, a wonderful player and a calm, quiet, likable man who had a deep, quiet, mature Christian faith. I don't remember how it came about, but almost right away we established a practice of sitting out on the lawn after dinner for a long talk before my evening run. I liked Mark very much and looked forward to our conversations; but in all honesty, I had an agenda. I wanted to debate the merits of Christianity.

I remember Mark's wonderful patience and utter lack of defensiveness as I challenged him on his beliefs. Always, he was respectful, interested, open to my arguments. The time came around mid-summer that I thought to myself, I'm winning! He's a nice guy, but he's wavering in the face of my dazzling ideas.

One evening, on my post-conversation run, I actually had the thought that perhaps I no longer had to work to elude God. Maybe I really was on my own now, free to pursue a life in music or whatever else I wanted. I got back to the house and was stretching out on the lawn, thinking these thoughts, when suddenly I was in a different state altogether. Not for the first time, but more powerfully than ever before, I felt surrounded by the loving presence of God. I literally got up, went into the house, and sent for an application to divinity school.

Through my kind friend Mark, the Advocate had proven me wrong. All my intellectual efforts to disprove the reality that our lives are in God had fallen away. The Lord had been pursuing me all along, and I had known it; I had been working hard to oppose it, out of sheer willfulness and fear. Now, I was convicted of this sin, right in the courtroom on Colonel Hill's lawn. I saw that there could be no righteousness except in the service of the Lord of love. And I experienced the gentleness of his judgement, asking only that I let him love me and that I live in response to that love.

Let me hasten to say that this was not the end of my efforts to argue against what I knew to be true, nor have I lived on anything like a straight and narrow path. The gift of Pentecost is not that we human beings ever completely lose our sinful predispositions in this life, but that the Holy Spirit is actively working to guide us to live according to God's will and purposes. He helps us in our personal spiritual lives, our lives in fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ, and in our digestion of the Word of God made known to us in scripture. He fulfills Jesus' promise to us that we are never alone, and never without God's own guidance.

It's interesting – on this day on which we celebrate language, understanding words that would usually be foreign to us, speaking ecstatically and finding ourselves understood – it is perhaps what we hear when we are quiet – in the silence of our own interior lives – that emerges as the most important language of all. How have you been opposing what you know to be true in your own life? Are you willing to be quiet and let the Advocate speak to you wherever Colonel Hill's lawn is in your life? Will you embrace the truth that the Lord loves you and has work for you to do?

And finally, let us embrace the truth together that the Lord loves our Sister Parishes, and has sent His Spirit to move palpably and powerfully among us during these days of becoming one parish. Let us pray that the Spirit will continue to move, guiding and directing us, in our Forums today, and throughout the process that lies ahead. May nothing less than this be true for us on this great Day of Pentecost, and in all the days that lie before us.