

John 20:19-23^v

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Or

John 7:37-39^{vi vii}

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

^v About the Gospel: John 20:19-23

This postresurrection appearance of Jesus is shared with the other gospels. Jesus shows his wounds to establish that the crucified Jesus and the risen Christ are one and the same. John's account stresses the fulfillment of the promises made in the Farewell Discourse: Christ's return and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

For John, the coming of the Holy Spirit is intimately linked to the resurrection. Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, creating humanity anew for eternal life. To this new

creation, the Church, he then bestows the power to mediate forgiveness. Its mission will divide people by their response.

^{vi} **About the Alternate Gospel: John 7:37-39**

In this passage, Jesus affirms once again, as he had earlier in his encounter with the Samaritan woman, that he is indeed the source of the “living water” that will nourish us for eternal life. In this context, however, he makes it clear that this water is the Holy Spirit that will pour forth after they receive it when Jesus has departed.

^{vii} **Reflection and Response**

As we celebrate the birthday of the Church, we can compare this feast to the birthdays of human beings. The early ones are filled with thanksgiving as parents rejoice in the marvel of their child. Successive birthdays mark maturation in appearance, abilities and moral development. In later years, birthdays are still the occasion for gratitude, simply because we’ve survived another year!

How does that progression parallel our annual celebration of Pentecost? The first one had the rawness of birth, along with the overflowing joy that accompanies new life. Dare we even call this tiny cluster of first believers a church? Although Jesus was physically present with them, they constantly misunderstood his message. Their loyalty and belief were shaky. When crisis struck, they disintegrated completely. We see them in today’s gospel huddled fearfully behind locked doors. Hardly heroic.

But their flaws make their rebirth seem even more spectacular. Once before, they had left everything to follow Jesus. On this day, he prompts them again to forsake a former life and focus on him. In so doing, they would abandon their fear and timidity. They would discover surprising new powers and a whole new way of life. As individuals and as a community, they would find what miracles Jesus, breathing on and in them, could accomplish.

In the letter to the Corinthians, we find marks of a more mature community. Originally, Christians esteemed the phenomenon they witnessed on the first Pentecost: speaking in tongues. But later, Paul must temper their enthusiasm. He recalls them to the centrality of the cross and broadens their perspective to include an appreciation of all the Spirit’s gifts.

As adults we need Paul’s reminder about the value of diversity. If each birthday finds us more calcified, more convinced that ours is the only way to do things, we are regressing. The apostle called the early Christians to celebrate diversity. Appreciating multiplicity means that although things may not be done the way we would have done them, by the people we would have chosen, we can still rejoice in the myriad ways the Spirit works.

Perhaps a birthday is a good time to take stock. Do we believe the Spirit is still at work in 21st-century North America? Does the Spirit ignite our homes and our hearts? If so, we can be grateful for another year of growth.