

(In)tangible
Acts 2:1 – 21; 1 Corinthians 12:3b – 13
Sunday, May 31, 2020

(The sermon video begins with an empty pulpit. You can hear Patrick, but you cannot see him.)

For the past 11 weeks, Ridgley and I have been preaching sermons and leading worship for a congregation that we *cannot see*. And it is surprisingly difficult. So I thought I'd give you a little sample of what that's *like* today. I know this is a little weird, being able to *hear* me and not *see* me, and that's kind of the *point*. I actually wanted to do the sermon this way for a very specific *reason*; I think it gives us a great opportunity to understand something about Pentecost and about *God*.

So, real quick, before we get into that, a little background on Pentecost. *We* celebrate Pentecost as a Christian holy day, when God sent the Holy Spirit to be with God's people and the church was born. But Pentecost was actually a holy day a long time *before* that. The Jewish people celebrated Pentecost for centuries before Jesus came around.

For the people of Israel, Pentecost was an annual harvest festival that was commanded to them (that they observe) in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. Moses had led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. They went out into the wilderness, and fifty days after they left Egypt, they came to Mount Sinai, where Moses went up on top of the mountain, and God gave him the Ten Commandments and all the rest of the 600+ laws that the people of Israel were supposed to observe.

So God gave them the law *fifty days* after they left slavery in Egypt. Every year, fifty days after the Passover (which is the holy day that celebrates their freedom from slavery; fifty days after

that) they remembered and celebrated how God gave them the law. They called it *Shavuot* in Hebrew, or the Festival of Weeks (*Shavuot* means *weeks*), and faithful Jews had to go and make certain *offerings* at the temple in Jerusalem on that holy day.

That's why, in our reading from Acts this morning, there were *so many people* in Jerusalem on Pentecost. It says, "There were devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem." They were *there* because they had to come to the temple to make their offerings for *Shavout* (the Festival of Weeks). They were celebrating the Jewish holy day that was fifty days after the Passover.

Pentecost is a Greek word that means, "fifty." That's how the Greeks referred to *Shavuot* or the Festival of Weeks. Because *fifty days after* they were set free from slavery in Egypt, God gave them the law. Fifty days, so *Pentecost*, or *fifty*.

Now, for the Jewish people, Pentecost was a celebration of God giving them the law. The *law* was how Jewish people could live *at one* with God and their neighbor. If they kept these laws, they would be *bound* to God, they were living in right relationship with God and with each other.

For *Christians*, Pentecost is the day when God gave God's *Holy Spirit* to us. We don't live under the law anymore; that's not what binds us to God. The *Holy Spirit* connects us to God, makes us *at one* with God and with each other. So for Jews *and* Christians, Pentecost is all about remembering and celebrating that we are not alone; we are bound to God, we are at one with God, we are *connected* to God, even when we can't *see* God. And we are bound to each other, connected to each other, even when we cannot *see* one another.

You can't *see* me this morning, and we aren't *physically* together, but in a very real sense, I am *present* with you. It's the same way with God.

Before Jesus died, he was talking to his disciples, and he said to them, "I'm going to have to leave you soon, but don't worry. I'm not going to leave you alone. The Holy Spirit, who the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." In other words, "There's going to be a time when you won't *see* me anymore. When that time comes, don't worry. I will still be present with you, you will still be *bound* to me through the Holy Spirit, even when you can't *see* me."

Not a single one of us has ever *seen* God. We feel God's *presence*, though. And if we *listen*, we can still hear God's voice, speaking in our lives today, sometimes through the voices of those around us. *That* is what Pentecost is all about.

It's *easy* to *feel* sometimes like we are in this all alone. It's *easy* to get *discouraged* because we can't *see* any sign of God's presence in our lives. We can't see how any of this is possibly going to get better or work out. Through cancer and sickness and this virus, through addiction and abuse and grief and depression and broken relationships, it's *really easy* to feel abandoned and alone and afraid. What we are reminded of today, though, is that it's not that God has *left* us or that we are *alone* in those times; it's just that God is *present with us* in a new way. We have this *connection to God* and to each other that cannot be broken by *anything* or *anyone*.

I've talked before about how the Greek and Hebrew words for *spirit* mean several different things. The Hebrew word for *spirit* is *ruach*, and it also means *breath* or *wind*. The Greek word

for *spirit* is *pneuma*, and it *also* means *breath* or *wind*. So in scripture, whenever it talks about God's *spirit*, it is also talking about God's *breath* or God's *wind*.

If someone *breathes* on you, how do you *know* they are breathing on you? You can't *see* the air coming from their mouth to your skin. But you can *feel* it. If you're outside and the wind is blowing, how do you *know* the wind is blowing? You can't *see* the air moving. But you can *feel* it. And you can see its effects, as it makes trees sway and leaves rustle. How do you *know* that God is with you, that God is *present* in this world and in your life? You can't *see* God. But you can *feel* God. And you can see the effects of God's presence in your life and in the world around you. God has *breathed* God's *ruach*, God's *pneuma*, God's *breath*, God's *spirit* into us. There is something *of God* in us and in the world around us. There is an inherent connection to God and to each other that cannot be taken away, because it was put there by God.

Now, I know that one of the challenges today is that you might not know where to *look* during this sermon. You're used to looking at someone while they preach, and there's no one to focus your eyes on right now. And so your eyes are probably wandering and your thoughts might even be wandering, because it can be a little harder to focus when there is no one to focus *on*. That's a problem that I have experienced over the past 11 weeks. I'm used to looking out at pews full of people while I preach, but now there's no one to look at. And so I find myself not always knowing *where* to look, and sometimes my attention wanders.

That is *also* one of the challenges we face with the Holy Spirit. When we think about the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – it's relatively easy to think about God as Father or Creator. We have an image for that. We can look at the world around us and see the things that God has created. It's easy to think about God as Son because we look at Jesus Christ. We have an image

for that. We literally have *pictures*, even if they're not exactly what he *looked* like. It's something to focus our thoughts on. It's a lot harder to think about the Holy Spirit, because we don't have a *person* to *look at*. The Holy Spirit is often referred to as the most overlooked person in the Trinity. We don't always know what to *do* with the Holy Spirit, how to *relate* to the Spirit, because there is a sense in which the Holy Spirit is *intangible*. I mean, we're talking about a *spirit* here. Something ethereal. Invisible. Not concrete or physical.

But...(Patrick walks in to the video)

The Holy Spirit *is* tangible, concrete, and physical. There is a theologian named Michael Welker who says that "It is a widespread opinion that the Holy Spirit is the 'unknown God,' the most hidden mystery within the Trinity." But Welker says that what *scripture* actually *shows* us is that "the Holy Spirit represents the presence and reality of the salvation event in a way that can be experienced with the senses."¹ There is something tangible about the Holy Spirit that we can *see* and *hear* and *touch*.

The first Christians experienced the Holy Spirit as a *rushing wind* that they could feel and hear, a *dove* and *fire* that they could see. That was *tangible* and *physical* for them.

Paul writes to the Corinthians about how the Holy Spirit is made manifest in this world and in our lives through a variety of gifts. The Holy Spirit takes the form of wisdom and knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, the discernment of spirits, and the speaking and interpreting of tongues. These are all tangible realities that we can see and hear and feel and experience. He goes on to talk in verses 12 and 13 about how the Holy Spirit is made manifest in the *body of*

¹ Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, 184.

Christ, the church, the community of believers gathered together for the worship and mission of God. I am the Spirit of God made tangible for you, and you are the Spirit of God made tangible for me. We can look at each other and experience the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit in real, concrete, tangible ways.

Paul says later in his letter to the Galatians that the Holy Spirit produces real, tangible fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When we experience those things – in ourselves or in each other – we are experiencing the tangible, concrete presence of the Holy Spirit. Those things – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity – those are not ethereal, abstract concepts. They are *real*. They are *physical*.

On that first Pentecost in Acts, the first Christians overcame the barrier of language to *hear* and *understand* one another in new ways. That was *tangible*. And when *we* hear and understand one another across all the barriers that divide us today – language, race, gender, class, politics – we are experiencing the tangible, physical, concrete presence of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit *is* something – *someone* – that we can see and hear and touch. We just have to know where to *look*. We look to *each other*. We experience the tangible presence of the Holy Spirit *through each other*.

Paul writes that to each of us is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For something to be made manifest is to be made *real*, made *physical*. We receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit not simply for ourselves, so that *I* can be connected to God. We receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the *common good*, so that *we* can be connected to *each other*. Whatever wisdom I have is not simply for me, it's for *us*. Whatever faith I have is not simply for me, it's

for *us*. Whatever love I have is not simply for me, it's for *us*, that we might be connected to each other and to God.

So when you feel like you're in this all alone, and you don't know where to look, look to each other. Look to this community that God has placed you in the midst of. Look to the people around you who share their wisdom and discernment and love and joy and peace and patience and faith with you. Because *that* is where we experience the presence of God in real, tangible ways.