

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption. (Romans 8:15)

Once again this year Pentecost falls very close to the dates for the PCC's annual General Assembly. In fact, this year's Assembly took as its theme the words "receive the holy Spirit" – an acknowledgement that all we do as the church is a result of this mysterious, many-faceted gift of God.

So today we read the expected texts, and we ponder the mystery of this gift that, to the disciples, came as a gust of wind clothed in tongues of flame. We consider, twenty centuries on, what it means to be recipients of that gift at our baptism. We debate the expressions of the spirit – healing, insight, speaking in tongues – that may be outside of our own experience. And we pray, with the church throughout the ages, for the wisdom, energy, compassion and guidance that has long been the hope of those born 'of water and the spirit'. Pentecost - that least Presbyterian of holy days - is upon us.

And I must be honest; having tried to follow events at this year's Assembly while reflecting on the appointed lessons for today has been a terribly challenging exercise. Assembly (like all of our church 'courts') is constituted by worship and an appeal for the Spirit's guidance. We acknowledge our dependence on God who is revealed in three distinct and diverse 'persons'. And we promise to go about the business of the church with nothing less than God's glory our goal.

And we struggle mightily in that promise.

This is nothing new. In fact, Presbyterians are more famous for our acknowledgement of sin than for our expressions of (or in) the Spirit. No tongues or dancing in the aisles for us; we are the epitome of 'decency and good order' out of respect for the Spirit that brings (from the beginning) order from the chaos of Genesis chapter one. What I am learning about the events of this year's Assembly is challenging my assessment of this 'decently and in good order' denomination in which I serve.

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The primary talking point (for years now I must admit) was once again the question of inclusion (and inclusive policies) for the LGBTQI community. Among other initiatives, a committee of former moderators presented a plan meant to guide the discussion and move the assembly towards a decision. On Tuesday, that plan resulted in a majority vote to recommend a policy of full inclusion to the church at large. I remember thinking “this is the work of the spirit!”

(I have been directly involved in these conversations, and have seen similar recommendations dismissed without debate only three years ago)

By the time Assembly adjourned, there was a radically different proposal in place – one that could see the church recognize two distinct definitions of marriage (among other changes). To be clear, all of this must come to the presbyteries and sessions of the church for consideration, and then must be approved at a future assembly (once again, under the cover of ‘decently and in good order’). My hopeful exclamation about the work of the spirit has modulated into a minor key. There is concern and confusion. While all is not undone, certainly everything is now less certain. And here on Pentecost Sunday my prayer becomes ‘Lord PLEASE send your spirit...’

But what would that look like?

Acts chapter 2 describes wind and flame and a babel of language – praise and exclamations of God’s goodness and grace. Gathered crowds of visitors to the city heard these in their own language, which suggests to me that this was less about the ability to speak that it was about the ability to hear (and recognize) the message of grace being shared.

In the letter to the church in Rome, Paul reminds his friends that they were not given a spirit of slavery but of adoption - in other words, the spirit’s inclination is expansive and inclusive. The spirit attracts diversity and creates a new thing. The Spirit sent witnesses

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beyond the borders of Judea and Galilee and ‘made disciples’ - not by coercion but by invitation - using the language of the people.

If we imagine that the Spirit’s presence gives us permission to boast, or claim superiority, then we still have a lot to learn. When we think (as some do) that the spirit reveals herself in secret, and only to a chosen few, then we haven’t paid enough attention to scripture.

The spirit is trying to be heard - patiently waiting to be recognized. The Spirit’s target has never been the ‘in crowd’ - God’s history of revealing holy truth includes a vast and various audience: women, warriors, wanderers, heathens, harlots, prophets, paupers...the list is endless. The church is where we imagine the Spirit must be, but it doesn’t take much imagination to consider that the Spirit is at work elsewhere - waiting for us to join her.