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[Scripture for Life](#)

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I once asked a friend of mine when she had gotten married. She said, “We were married from the moment we decided that we would spend the rest of our lives building up our love. Our wedding celebrated that.” Another friend told me that his marriage happened over and over each time he and his wife confronted problems and decided again to make it work.

We tend to think that there are moments that change us forever. We might refer to the time when we allowed ourselves to fall in love. It could be the day of becoming a parent or being ordained or making a lifelong commitment. But the more we think about those events, the more we realize these were, at most, signal moments in a much bigger process. We can discover the seeds of our “new” identity appearing years before we had any idea of what they meant. People become parents on the day of the birth or adoption of their first child, but they will spend the rest of their days making their parenthood come true through their relationship to their children.

Anyone who has striven over time to remain faithful knows that a commitment expressed in a moment necessarily passes through a lifetime of growth and development, of deepening and testing, of becoming ever truer. That is one dimension of what the Christian Scriptures present in the variety of Pentecost accounts.

Luke gives us a full 50 days of post-resurrection appearances, instructions and waiting, before the disciples experienced their baptism by fire and the Holy Spirit. According to John, Jesus breathed the Spirit into the disciples on the evening of the “first day of the week.” In reality, the Spirit’s action in them started when they met Jesus and deepened each time they acted in Jesus’ name.

Today, our psalm has us pray, “Lord, send out your Spirit and renew the face of the earth.” We should be very careful about praying that, because God could take us at our word. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that when the disciples began to preach, the people were confused because they all understood them in their own language. People who were accustomed to boundaries that divided one group from another suddenly found themselves swept up in the same movement. The old, easy separations fell away as a bunch of yokel Galileans shared a message that made their hopes sail and set their hearts on fire. But that is the least of it.

On the day when the resurrected Christ first became present in their midst, the disciples were struggling to take in the fact that death wasn’t what they thought it was, that Jesus was risen, and that he had come to them offering peace. In the midst of their dizzying confusion, Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” He was not simply forgiving them but inviting them to share in his own relationship with God. So just as God the Creator had done after fashioning the human creature, Jesus breathed over them, suffusing them with his Spirit and his mission. Then, he gave them the one necessary command that would keep his mission alive in and through them: “Forgive.”

That was it. No catechism, no dogma, no institution; no orders, hierarchy, hymns or liturgy. Just forgiveness.

As time went on, they did develop liturgy, catechisms, hymns and the rest. The intent was to provide structures, occasions, shared human spaces, in which Jesus' mission could come to life. Sometimes, it worked.

The feast of Pentecost celebrates a key moment of the Spirit's ever-renewing presence in our lives. Pentecost functions like a movement that breaks down the boundaries of time and culture, and most of all, of our settled and certain attitudes that are epitomized in an unwillingness to forgive. The symbol of multiple languages represents everything that divides us, everything that truncates communion. Pentecost proclaims that God created our diversity to enrich us so that understanding one another would lead us to grow in community with all of God's beloved. Paul's message to the Corinthians says as much. The Spirit gives a variety of gifts without which the whole cannot be truly holy.

If we want Pentecost to come to life in us, today's Scriptures tell us that forgiveness is the place to start. First, as the opening rite of the eucharistic celebration teaches us, we need to accept ourselves as beloved and forgiven sinners. Today's Gospel demonstrates that knowing and accepting that truth about ourselves opens us to the Spirit. According to the model of today's Gospel, the second step in our Pentecost process is to become involved in reconciliation by forgiving and by being agents of forgiveness who help others learn that it is possible. Pentecost is a long process.

## **ACTS 2:1-11**

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 ninth chapter of his Gospel when he wrote of Jesus, "When the days for his being taken up were fulfilled, he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem" (italics added). Luke's language hints that a phase of the Gospel was completed between the time when Jesus set his face for Jerusalem and the disciples' reception of the Spirit. That period fulfilled everything Jerusalem symbolized. 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 import 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 coming 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* (here *pnoe*) 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 those 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 (Luke 3:16).

Unless we pay careful attention, we can miss the evangelical 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.

## **PSALMS 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34**

Today's psalm of praise switches between the hopeful petition, "Lord, send out your Spirit!" and a song of joy-filled acclaim for God's life-giving care for all of creation. In the first stanza, we sing, "Bless the Lord, O my soul!" inviting us to go to our own depths in order to appreciate God's wondrous works. In the second stanza, we sound like children

singing for their parents. After we express our desire that God's glory be praised forever, we express our wistful hope that our own song might please God. In the final stanza, we reprise the theme of the day: The Spirit is like the breath God gave Adam to bring him — and all humanity — to life.

Before we sing this, it would be good to read it over and think about it. There is a well-known warning that we should be careful about what we pray for, because God just might answer. Once we have considered the fact that the prayer asks God to renew us and creation, we can decide if we will really sing and pray this, or just let the lector proclaim it while we pretend to mouth the words.

## **1 CORINTHIANS 12:3b-7, 12-13**

Today, we hear Paul start off his famous discourse comparing the body of Christ to a human body. There are multiple levels of meaning hidden in this analogy between Christ's ongoing presence and the body every human being knows as her or his own way of being in the world. Paul wants us to think about the body with its strengths and weaknesses, the body that automatically works as a unit to protect and enhance the experience of the whole.

Before he launches into his treatise on the role of each part of the body, Paul speaks of the gifts of the Spirit that underlie everything he is going to say. Today's selection actually begins in mid-sentence. Paul has opened this section of the letter by explaining what it means to act under the influence of the Spirit of God. He insists that no one who is under the Spirit's influence can deny or denigrate Christ, and no one can genuinely proclaim Christ except through the power of God's Spirit.

It is too easy for us to interpret this as if Paul were promoting salvation by vocabulary: Those who say the right words prove that they belong to Christ. But that has nothing to do with Paul's intent here. As he goes on, especially as he enumerates the works of the Spirit in the community, he insists that the effects of the Spirit become visible in concrete actions much more than through any verbal expression.

Another part of Paul's message that our selection underlines is that all who are called by Christ, all who have been baptized, are called to be part of one and the same body. That implies that the body of Christ is present only where there is unity. Where there is division, competition, lack of peace and mutual acceptance, the body of Christ is crippled. A divided community is incapable of proclaiming the truth and reality that Jesus is Lord.

While that idea could lead us to self-flagellation and depression about our failings, that is not Paul's intention. Remember that he began by saying that all of this is the work of the Spirit. On our own, no matter how articulate, theologically astute, or socially adept we might be, we cannot proclaim God's love. This communal proclamation of Christ happens only through the influence of the Holy Spirit. Thus when we reflect on how our life together proclaims the lordship of Christ, when we see the gaps, the point is not to denigrate ourselves but to look for where we are resistant or closed to God's Spirit. When we do that, our questions about division stop concentrating on who is right and seek instead to understand where we are called to go, to see what new thing God is trying to draw forth from us.

Paul's image of the body calls us to revel in our diversity and the possibilities it offers. On this feast of Pentecost, the apostle to the Gentiles reminds us that the diversity some see as the root of division is the Spirit's gift if we will only open ourselves to understand it. The body of Christ is bigger, broader and fuller than we can imagine. The Spirit invites us to become holy by allowing ourselves to be stretched enough to participate in it.

## **JOHN 20:19-23**

What can you say when someone you love and have hurt deeply comes offering you peace? That is the situation of the disciples as John describes them on the evening of the first day. As John tells the story, they were gathered in fear of Jesus' enemies when Jesus himself became present among them. There was no hiding who he was and what he had been through. His wounds proclaimed his mortality even as his presence reinterpreted the meaning of death. Most of all, in spite of all that happened, including their fearful hiding from his passion, Jesus reminded his disciples of the promise he had made when they shared their last meal together: "My peace I give to you" (John 14:27).

John tells us that the disciples then rejoiced. Their joy had to include a good measure of confusion. They were rejoicing in the fact that all of their thinking had been mistaken — from the meaning of what had happened to Jesus to their reasons

for fear and hiding. Their rejoicing must have been a very humbling kind of elation. They were celebrating the fact that nothing in the world is as it seemed, that they were wrong in their fears and forgiven for their failure as disciples.

Jesus apparently thought that this moment, the time when they were thoroughly thrown off balance and were confused, was the perfect time to commission them. He offered them his peace again. Then, as if to tell them that knowing nothing but his peace was everything they needed, he gave them the commission that offered them an unending future with him.

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 17:18). Although Jesus may have implied in the past that this was their vocation, in John’s Gospel he had not sent his disciples out on mission until this moment. Additionally, this commissioning far outshines anything we see in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew 13:53-58, Mark 6:1-6, Luke 9:1-6 and 10:1-12). In what Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us, Jesus gave the disciples precise instructions and well-defined powers. Now, after his resurrection, Jesus invites them to become one with him in and through carrying forth God’s own mission. Then, in order for that to become possible, Jesus breathes his Holy Spirit into them, just as God blew the breath of life into the first human at the creation. Just as he had appeared among them as the betrayed friend offering peace, Jesus now gives them the mission to do the same. All he hopes they will ever accomplish is summarized in the offer of peace and forgiveness. Jesus warns them that if they fail to forgive, the world will not know forgiveness. Giving and proclaiming forgiveness is the way they will exercise God’s life-giving power in the world. That is their Pentecost vocation — and ours as well.

## Planning: Pentecost

By: Lawrence Mick

Today is Pentecost, which brings us to the end of the 50 days of Easter. Although there is always a challenge in keeping Easter themes alive this long, it is important that this feast should mingle the themes of Resurrection and the Spirit.

One way to do that is to mix Pentecost elements in with the Easter decor that has been present for the last 49 days, assuming you have kept things looking like Easter. Add some red material to the banners or red flowers to the floral displays. Think about hanging an image of a dove over the font or the altar if your space makes that feasible.

Music, too, can be a blend of Spirit songs and Easter hymns. Closing with a strong Easter song can be a fitting way of acknowledging the end of the great feast. Remember, too, that the dismissal adds the double Alleluia, just as on Easter Sunday, another reminder of the whole feast.

Of course, the underlying reason for such efforts is that the gift of the Spirit flows from the Resurrection. If you use the first option in the Lectionary for the Gospel, our readings recall two Pentecost events: one on Easter Sunday evening and one 50 days later. Both events are after the Resurrection and depend on it. Keep that linkage in mind as you choose songs, write petitions and choose among the various options for readings and prayer texts.

There are a plethora of texts provided in the Missal and the Lectionary for a Pentecost Vigil. If you choose to celebrate an extended vigil, you could use them all. If you are just celebrating a “typical” Saturday Mass, choose one of the four options for the first reading.

For Mass during the day, there are two options for the second reading and two for the Gospel. The first option in each case is the same as in Cycle A. The second ones are from Cycle C. Be sure to consult with the preachers to see which texts they prefer and then let the lectors and musicians know well in advance so that they can prepare accordingly. Remember also that the Sequence is obligatory today. Remind the musicians (and also the presiders!) so they don’t move to the Gospel procession too soon.

After the last Mass today, the paschal candle is moved to the baptistry for the rest of the year. This might also be a good day to have some kind of ministry fair, reminding parishioners that the gifts of the Spirit are given for the good of the whole community. This is also a good day to gather all those who have received sacraments of initiation this year for a reception after Mass to celebrate together. What works best for your community?

# Prayers: Pentecost

By: Joan DeMerchant

## Introduction

The early Christian community knew that Jesus and the life-giving Spirit were with them. That conviction sustained and empowered them to deal with unimaginable challenges. We are given the same presence, peace and forgiveness when we come together, and we are called today to pass that on to others. What signs of this presence do we experience? How do we express it to others?

## Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you were present to your disciples when they were hiding in fear: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you shared your peace and breathed the Spirit upon them: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you are present to us now with the same Spirit and peace: Lord, have mercy.

## Prayer of the Faithful

**Presider** Let us pray for the Spirit to continue to renew the face of the Earth.

**Minister** For the church, may it rise above problems, scandals and power struggles and be an unambiguous sign of the Spirit's presence for the world, we pray:

- For those who have been clear signs of God's peace, presence and forgiveness, for leaders, teachers, healers, pastors and ordinary faithful disciples, we pray:
- For those who touch us today in ways known only to us, who bring love and peace, clarity and forgiveness, sustenance and hope, we pray:
- For those who use wealth, power or notoriety as false claims of the Spirit's presence; and for those who denigrate the small, but powerful ways in which the Spirit touches lives, we pray:
- For those who feel abandoned by God — refugees, the poor, forgotten, lonely and disenfranchised; for all who suffer, may they know that God hears their distress and holds them close, we pray:
- In gratitude for the many gifts bestowed on this community, and for the courage to offer our own gifts for the good of others, we pray:

**Presider** Gracious God of life, we are ever in need of renewal as individuals, as a church and as a human community. Open us to the Spirit's power. May we recognize and employ the gifts you have given each of us to help renew the face of the Earth. We ask this boldly in the name of Jesus, who sends us forth. Amen.

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