

PENTECOST BLESSING

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Pentecost (8th Sunday of Easter)
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

John 20:19-23

When it was evening on that [Resurrection] day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the frightened disciples had met were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he showed them his hands and his side and 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, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

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Last Sunday afternoon six of our youth, four 9th graders and two 10th graders, stood together behind this (communion) table to make their first public profession of faith. It's commonly called confirmation. But I like to call it a Presbyterian bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah since it resembles that Jewish rite of passage. And some day William Jotham [Gonano], who was baptized this morning, may stand up in the same way.

By the way, "bar" in "bar mitzvah" means son. And "bat" in "bat mitzvah" means daughter. And "mitzvah" means law or Torah or the Way. Thus, *son or daughter of the Way*. No longer a child; an adult in the community of faith.

Those six young people had completed a three-month long course of study with their pastor and several of the Elders. That's how the church nurtures its young in the faith.

We can't give them the Holy Spirit. But we can invite them to a place and disposition where they might recognize the spirit in their hearts—the breath that is life, the fire that converts anxiety into faith, despair into hope and apathy into love.

It's the same spirit present in and unfolding through that grand and glorious 4.5 billion year old continuing story we call evolution. It's that same spirit and that spirit gives us visions of new possibilities. It never leaves us nor forsakes us. She is the wind that lifts us up on eagles' wings time and time again. Spirit is breath and so much more.

And so over the course of those three months, we learned a simple breath prayer. Every time we gathered we recited: *God is love and those who abide in love abide in God.*

Breathe in: *God is love.* Breathe out: *I am love.* Breathe in: *God is love.* Breathe out: *I am love.* Breathe in: *God is love.* Breathe out: *I am love.*

And then in silence each of us recollected signs of love and kindness we had witnessed that week. The students kept a personal diary of compassion. We were training our eyes to see the world in a way we usually don't see.

Holy Spirit, come make my eyes to see.

It takes a while for our eyes to adjust to more light. And it takes a while to be born and to be born again and again. Birth is a process. New birth is a process as well. We keep at it week after week; month after month; year after year.

And then one day we look up and see sparks like light bulbs dancing above the heads of our youth. One by one they got it.

Early this past spring, one of our confirmation students developed a project for the county social science fair. The theme was "constitutional rights!" Most projects were on gun rights. This student's project was entitled "The Fight for Equal Rights in the LGBT Community." She included in her display a rainbow scarf she had knitted to promote

marriage equality at the Presbyterian Church's General Assembly this summer in Detroit.

A judge took a look at her project, rebuked her publicly in front of others, and then mocked her and her church for its stand. But that young woman stood her ground that day and every day since. In fact, each of those six young people said publicly last Sunday they were proud to be part of such a church.

Last Sunday, as they stood facing the congregation composed of family and many friends, I said to them: *When you were newly born your parents presented you for baptism. You were baptized which is to say, initiated into the Body of Christ, the community of the Beloved, a worldwide movement of radical love, compassion and justice. Your parents brought you up and along in the Presbyterian tradition of the historic Christian faith. And now you are young adults, old enough and strong enough to confirm your own intentions and desires. Are you of your own free will now ready to stand within this Christian tradition and to learn, grow and walk with this congregation for the foreseeable future?*

And then I asked each by name—Robbie Barrat, Abby Colbert, Becca Colbert, Kate Glenn, Dylan Miller, Chloe Williams. *Are you ready?*

And each in turn said, *I am.*

And then each in turn stood at this lectern to tell us first of all what they find awesome and good about the world; then, secondly, how humans mess up; and finally what we might do to mend the world and God's good creation.

Those, as it turns out, are the three primary convictions of our tradition, which they discovered in our examination of Genesis 1-12. The world is good. Behold it is good! Even when things are dark and grim, we can believe the world is good and God is good.

One praised the kindness of people who have little to give but still give a lot. Another praised the beauty of mountains. Another praised human ingenuity and technology.

But we know and they know things are not always good. We mess up, sometimes badly.

As one said: we who have so much can be so very selfish. Another said, we discriminate against those who love others of the same gender. Another said, we are destroying the earth. Yes, we mess up.

But that's not the last word in our tradition. The last word is *hope* followed closely by *grace*.

With God's grace we can mend creation and build a better world. One student has already taken to repairing laptops and giving them to fellow students who can't afford one. Another is determined to build cars that do not use fossil fuels. Another wants to rescue endangered animals.

One confirmand quoted John Green's epigram from his book, *Looking for Alaska*. Green himself was quoting the last words spoken by the 15th century French poet Francois Rabelias, who on his death bed said: *I go to seek the Great Perhaps*. And thus John Green said: *That's why I'm going. So I don't have to wait until I die to start seeking a Great Perhaps*.

And when you think about it, that's the Pentecost blessing. The spirit gets under our skin, into our hearts and into our dreams with a Great Perhaps. *As the father has sent me, so send I you*. What if we love God and others fearlessly? What might happen? What is the Great Perhaps?

2000 years ago on the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit converted a fearful community into a community of bold witness, not unlike what we saw here last Sunday. If we closed our eyes here last Sunday, we could almost see fiery sparks dancing over the heads of six young people.

(Don't you now wish you had been here to welcome and support those young people? I hope you will next year.)

Last Sunday afternoon we welcomed six young adults into this community of faith and gave them small wooden crosses to impress them with the possibilities and costs of loving their world in the way and in the spirit of Jesus. The cost of Christian discipleship is not cheap. But it is the way, the truth and the life.

As the father has sent me so send I you – not out of this world into another world, but into this world, deeply into your world, in the power of the Holy Spirit, which is to say, in the power of love.