

A Homily by
The Reverend Jo Popham

“Think Differently”
Day of Pentecost
May 23, 2021
Acts 2:1-21

Some time ago Apple computers launched an advertising campaign that historically was perhaps the most successful, the most effective promotion ever. The print media and billboard ads used two words only: “Think different.” (My English grammar sensitivities have always wondered why they hadn’t used “Think differently.”) The two words appeared in large boldface type below black and white portraits of prominent figures who did indeed think differently: Albert Einstein, Maria Callas, Jim Hensen, Nelson Mandela, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mohammed Ali, Amelia Earhart, Bob Dylan, Pablo Picasso, Mahatma Gandhi, Thomas Edison, Martha Graham, Joan Baez, Miles Davis, Ansel Adams, Jackie Robinson, Charlie Chaplin, Jane Goodall, and the list goes on. It was a brilliant advertising campaign, brilliantly conceived and brilliantly carried out. I have wondered ever since why Jesus was not part of the campaign. If anyone truly thought differently, it was our Lord. Only a few pages into Walter Isaacson’s biography of the soul behind Apple computers, I found the answer to my question. Steve Jobs shared his views on Christianity with Walter Isaacson. He felt, as so many do today, that religion was at its best when it was expressed through spiritual experiences. Steve Jobs said that “The juice goes out of Christianity” when we Christians do not live like Jesus. This rings of what Gandhi said, “I like your Jesus but not your Christians.”

Many many people these days describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. Spiritual experiences are deeply rooted in the senses. People are seeking after something spiritual. These seekers have a feeling – perhaps an intuition – that there is something greater, but they are allergic to institutions of religion. Spirituality is an emotion. Religion is an obligation. Spirituality soothes. Religion mobilizes. Spirituality can be satisfied with itself. Religion is dissatisfied with the world. But the mobilized religious go about doing good – in the name of God.¹

So should we put the spiritual back into religion? I believe we absolutely must. What the disciples experienced was spiritual not necessarily religious. There was no institution of the Christian Church – not yet. The disciples received the Holy Spirit with their senses. Gathered together in a large house were many disciples and faithful followers of Jesus the Christ – the eleven remaining disciples and many others who had journeyed with him throughout his ministry, including many women. All together they waited. They likely were praying. In their individual and communal silence they waited for Jesus’s promises to be fulfilled. And then all their senses were assaulted. They felt the Holy Spirit like the force of a violent wind. They heard the Holy Spirit like the roar of a tornado. They saw and felt and smelled and tasted the Holy Spirit like fire. Anyone might have been afraid – sensing such forces – but they were not frightened. No, they were in a state of ecstatic joy. They looked at one another and saw each other’s hair and clothing flying about in the wind and divided tongues of fire on one another’s heads. And they broke out into uncontrollable babbling – they laughed with delight. They were on fire with the Holy Spirit. And they could not contain their joy. They wanted to share their spiritual experience with everyone. They ran out into the street. To the rest of the world they must have appeared crazy.

I am not suggesting that we dash out into the streets proclaiming that we have received the Holy Spirit this Pentecost. Likely the rescue squad dispatchers would soon be calling to find out which hospital could take multiple psych referrals. But we can leave today recharged to fulfill our baptismal covenants. I have a friend who – when she was confirmed – was told by her Bishop that she was to be a pyromaniac for God. So while I don’t think it would be wise to dance in the street as if we were on fire, I do want us to get “fired up” today. I want to know that the fire has not gone out for us. My prayer is that we are inspired to feed the fire of the Holy Spirit when we renew our Baptismal covenants again. I want us to remember what it felt like when we received the Holy Spirit for the first time. Did it feel like we were on fire for the Lord? And how do we describe that fire to others?

Try as he might Luke could not describe the Holy Spirit. The Acts of the Apostles that Luke penned has been called the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. But lest we think that the Holy Spirit came into being on Pentecost, we need to remember that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit who already existed.² And from Pentecost forward, the Holy Spirit has been a reality in the life of believers and in the church. Luke struggled to put into words what the disciples and followers of Jesus experienced when they received the Holy Spirit. He was – and we are – limited in our attempts to describe a divine mystery in human terms. We often speak of the Holy Spirit ourselves by what she has done and continues to do. This third person of the Trinity, our Counselor, our Guide, who gives us access to God, assures us, anoints, calls and commissions, creates, acts, and empowers, gives us gifts, brings us peace, indwells, intercedes, liberates, inspires and molds us, sanctifies, teaches, and regenerates us. My friends, the Holy Spirit is real and alive. And yet we still cannot fully express what we feel and know about her. And we must seem crazy when we try to explain the Holy Spirit to someone who does not know God, someone who does not know that everyone is saved, someone who has not felt the power of the Holy Spirit alive and active in his or her life. But we must try. Yes, we must try to describe the fire of the Holy Spirit. It is what we are called to do – to be fools for Christ – to think differently. However inadequately we try to describe the coming of the Holy Spirit we know that this was a milestone event. But was it fulfillment of the story of salvation? Well, yes, and no – because salvation continues. The coming of the Holy Spirit marked the beginning of the church. The Holy Spirit guided and strengthened the new church as it spread through much of the Roman Empire. And she continues to guide and strengthen the church today. The fulfillment of Jesus's words came to the disciples and the many others in a powerfully spiritual way on the day we call Pentecost.³ And with the coming of the fire of the Holy Spirit all humanity was given the power to become one, to understand one another in spite of their differences, different languages, different cultures, different colors and creeds, because God was in their midst through the Holy Spirit.

What did all the people in the Apple ads have in common and what do they have in common with those who have experienced the Holy Spirit and allowed her to change their hearts? The people in the Apple ads were “the crazy ones” – the misfits – the rebels – the troublemakers – the round pegs in the square holes – the ones who saw things differently. They were not fond of rules, and they had no respect for the status quo.⁴ You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can’t do is ignore them. Because they changed things. They invented. They imagined. They healed. They explored. They created. They inspired. They pushed the human race forward. Maybe they had to be crazy. How else could they have stared at an empty canvas and seen a work of art? Or sat in silence and heard a song that had never been written? Or reset the Gloria to “All of Me”? Or gazed at the red planet and seen a laboratory on wheels? Or looked at a mangled bicycle and the faces of hungry people who dreamt of a hot shower and built ministries around them? The ones who were crazy enough to think they could change the world – are the ones who did.⁵ We Christians too are the ones who can change the world, through believing and living into our beliefs with the help of the fire of the Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen us. Can we do this through the church? We can when the church is at its best.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ See <http://ideas.time.com/2013/03/21/viewpoint-the-problem-with-being-spiritual-but-not-religious/#ixzz2RpPaH08r>.

² The Holy Spirit was speaking in David (Acts 1:16); the Spirit spoke through Isaiah (Acts 28:25); Stephen accuses the Jews of having, all through their history, opposed the Spirit (Acts 7:51). In that sense the Spirit is God in every age revealing her truth to people. At the same time something special happened at Pentecost. (William Barclay on Acts, Chapter 2. See <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/acts-2.html>.)

³ The disciples remembered what Jesus had promised, and so they gathered in Jerusalem. It was Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, when the Jews commemorated the anniversary of the day that God gave them the Torah – the day that the nation of Israel became committed to serving God. Yet all nations and tribes and peoples were divided, until the coming of the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Sound like anyone you know?

⁵ Paraphrased from Apple, Inc.