PENTECOST 2016

(Acts 2: 1-11; 1 Corinthians 12: 3b-7, 12-13; John 20: 19-23)

THE HOLY SPIRIT GUIDES US TO HARMONY

I recently attended a lady’s 100th birthday party. I believe this was the first time I have ever experienced such a thing. The woman is named Lorraine. And she and her husband and children were our neighbors when I was growing up in Clintonville. Our families’ kids were about the same age. In the summers especially, we played together almost all the time for several years. This included many different games, including ball of various kinds – and a lot of tree-climbing. We played baseball (hard ball, that is) – girls too -- in an alley. This made us good at placing our hits, and I think we broke only one window in all those years. (The guy was not happy, but he got over it.) We played basketball with hoops hung over garages – not necessarily of the right height. As time went on and we grew up, we mostly went our separate ways. But one of my sisters became the best friend of one of Lorraine’s daughters – all the way through grade school and then high school at Watterson and on to OSU and through life up to now. My sister has been my family’s connection to Lorraine’s family.

The surprise party was very simple. It took place at the Clintonville Woman’s Club which is an older facility with character, dating from the 1930s. (We had my own mother’s 80th there just before I came to Westerville.) There was food, drink, fun, a lot of memories – and most of all a lot of love. Lorraine is able to walk pretty well and is in excellent health for her age. Her mind is clear as crystal – undoubtedly better than mine. Her pastor presented her with a rosary blessed by Pope Francis. One of Lorraine’s sons died a few years ago, and that seemed to be the only sadness present. He and all the children have had good marriages and there were numbers of grandchildren and great grandchildren everywhere in the room. There was an overwhelming sense of gratitude among all present for the gift of life and for the gift of family. Lorraine represented to all of us who grew up in the neighborhood the blessing of having parents who loved us and were totally devoted to each other and to their kids. The simplicity and beauty of family life was on display at this celebration. And so was openness. The blessings of stability we had growing up have made us accepting of all kinds of folks from all kinds of backgrounds. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Today is the Holy Spirit’s day – the Feast of Pentecost. As the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles recalls, the coming of the Spirit upon the fearful disciples gave them the guts to begin to preach the Gospel to a great diversity of people speaking many different languages. And this is why Pentecost is considered the Birthday of the Church! From that day on, the apostles and other preachers, including eventually our parish’s patron, St. Paul, spread the Good News throughout the Greco-Roman world. One of the first challenges was whether this message could be shared with the Gentiles without their having to become Jews. Paul was on the side of going
directly to these non-Jews – and he won the day (as he usually did). Paul’s courage and flexibility came from the Holy Spirit.

Throughout history the church has wrestled with the balance between safeguarding the Tradition of the faith and being open to the development of this Tradition. This is wrestling with change – and the Spirit is always our guide here. There is one of those light bulb jokes that goes like this: “How many Jewish men does it take to change a light bulb? The answer comes: “CHANGE? This joke is as applicable to Catholics as it is to Jews.

Today Pope Francis is giving us an example of a new attitude of openness while being faithful to the church’s teachings. In his recent Apostolic Exhortation entitled “The Joy of Love,” he celebrates the Sacrament of Marriage and the experience of family life which permeates my boyhood memories and which is, I believe, the grace-filled experience of numerous St. Paul parishioners and countless other couples throughout the world as well. At the same time, based on the conclusions of the two recent synods on the Family, the pope is calling us to be open to the great diversity of marriage and family life that the church has considered less than perfect or ideal. This is really a call to refrain from judgment. Francis focuses in “The Joy of Love” especially on the reality of marriages which are “outside the church” (as the saying goes) – that is, those relationships in which one or both of the couple have been married before and are now married civilly to each other without a church annulment. He makes the point that the consciences of these couples may be at peace with their marriages – and no one in the church has the right to judge them. No one has the right to consider such couples to be in sin. The pope writes that the church is “called to form consciences, not to replace them.”

In this beautiful book on love and in his many other writings, Francis has encouraged us to be open to all kinds of folks who might look different from us and/or who might worship different form us. Under the Holy Spirit’s guidance, he has insistently challenged us to get close to those on the outskirts of society – close enough to smell them and to care for their needs. There are many ways to be on the outskirts or on the margins – including people with disabilities, children who are special needs, those who are sick and dying and mourning, and those who are sinners. He has also refused to judge gay people. There are families which are sometimes on the margins too – single parent families, blended families, broken families – and, of course, poor families.

The Holy Spirit through this incredible pope beckons us to embrace the diversity of the human family and the diversity of the Catholic family. In 2013 on his first Pentecost as the bishop of Rome, Francis said this in his homily: [quote] “Let us ask ourselves today: are we open to ‘God’s surprises’? Or are we closed and fearful before the newness of the Holy Spirit? Do we have the courage to strike out along new paths which God’s newness sets before us, or do we resist, [barricading ourselves behind] transient structures which have lost their capacity for openness to what is new? … The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of unity, which does not mean uniformity, but which leads everything back to harmony … When we are the ones who want to build unity in accordance with our human plans, we end up creating uniformity, standardization … So let us
ask ourselves: Am I open to the harmony of the Holy Spirit, overcoming every form of exclusivity? Do I let myself be guided by him, living in the Church and with the Church?” [End quote] (Quoted in Give Us This Day, May 2016, p. 164)

The 100th birthday party was a time to count our blessings as family, friends, and neighbors. I have been pastor here thirteen years now and I have seen similar blessings (awesome blessings) among the parishioners of St. Paul. No one and no family is perfect, but by grace there is a lot of marital stability in this community. May we who recognize how fortunate we are keep enlarging our hearts to accept every one of God’s children – as the Holy Spirit prompts us! It is big hearts that the same Spirit uses as his instruments to create harmony in the church and in the world!