

A Sermon for the Day of Pentecost, Year A  
Acts 2:1-21 & John 20:19-23  
May 11, 2008 ~ Fr. Jim Cook

## *With God, All Things Are Possible.*

**R**ichard Stilwell of Concord, Massachusetts was working underneath the family car, a full-sized van that weighed nearly two tons, when it slipped from its blocks and pinned him to the driveway. Richard's wife, Donna, saw what had happened and, bringing to bear every resource common to the average 5'2" 110-pound woman, lifted up the car just enough for Richard to roll to safety.

It's a familiar story, isn't it? And we've all heard it in one form or another, and operating under the rubric that "familiarity breeds contempt," we might be tempted to dismiss it altogether. But on the Day of Pentecost, even this story has something to tell us. Because it reminds us of what is probably the first, and most basic, of religious insights: and that is, that there is more to life, and especially more to *us*, than what simply meets the eye.

Now, non-religious folk (and I mean just that, non-*religious* and not necessarily non-*Christian*) will, often, look at the world and see only what's at the surface level of things. And for them, the temptation would be to take a story, like the one about Richard and Donna Stilwell, and discount it altogether because, on the surface, there are all sorts of things that a 5'2" 110-pound woman shouldn't reasonable be able to do.

But religious folk can look at the world and, in addition to what everybody else can see, see more. Because our faith allows us to see levels of meaning, and complexity, and power, that other folks just don't see. Or don't want to see. And on a good day, we can see the world alive and ablaze with the presence of God, and therefore rich with possibilities that others, who don't have eyes to see them, couldn't possibly understand or appreciate.

Today, in a couple of our Bible readings, we heard about the Holy Spirit, whom one priest (*i.e.*, Fr. James Liggett, who was, until just recently, the rector of St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Big Springs, Texas) described as "the active, lively, and powerful presence of God in creation." That's a pretty good description. And when we hear the readings that were presented this morning, a question that, I think, would naturally come to mind is this: What exactly happens to a person when the Holy Spirit suddenly descends on them like a tongue of fire?

The first clue to what happens, was shown to us from the reading from the Acts of the Apostles. There, we are told that, when the Holy Spirit arrived on the scene, things which were empty, are suddenly, and surprisingly, filled:

"When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind (I think we all heard it last night, didn't we?) and it *filled* the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire,

appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were *filled* with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

Apparently, when the Spirit arrives, fullness is what’s on the menu.

Well, I think we all long to be filled and, more, to be *fulfilled*. Tom McGrath – author of *Raising Faith-Filled Kids: Ordinary Opportunities to Nurture Spirituality at Home* (Loyola Press) – talks about how he saw this longing plainly, when he was conducting a spiritual retreat for men who were members of various 12-step groups. McGrath writes:

They were all at different stages in their recovery. [But each] spoke powerfully and with great immediacy about the emptiness he had felt in his life and how the pain of that emptiness had led him down many a wayward path in futile attempts to fill that hole. [And each] man had discovered that “you can never get enough of that which will not satisfy.”

Well, I suspect that, because we all long to be filled, we also all know, to some extent, the pang of emptiness. And probably most of us have spent some amount of time venturing down dead-end roads, trying, in the words of that 1970’s rock classic *Woodstock*, “to get ourselves back to the garden.” Unfortunately, when left to our own devices, most of us fail in the attempt.

And maybe it’s for that reason that most of us can understand why the disciples felt so empty and afraid, and decided to lock themselves in a room. After all, they had only just recently witnessed the brutal death of their rabbi, the one man who seemed to be the answer to all their needs. But now he was gone, and they were, once more, beginning to doubt the very things that, only a few days earlier, seemed so sure. And that doubt, combined with their grief and fear, paralyzed them. But when the Holy Spirit filled their emptiness, something in them changed, and all of a sudden (or so it seems), the disciples felt an urgent need to share not only what had happened to them, but also to share *the certainty that had returned to their lives*. And so they spoke out.

But what’s really interesting is not just the fact that they spoke, but also the fact that they were able to speak effectively. Men who were otherwise fairly uneducated and untrained in the art of public speaking, were suddenly able to communicate in a way that transcended the barriers of language and culture. It was as if the Spirit within one man spoke to the spirit within the other, and a real connection was made. And the reality that God’s loving presence was, at any moment, and within any person, making all things new, came across clearly. And everyone who heard the disciples understood it completely. And that Spirit-filled communication caused a profound change in the hearts of everyone who heard, because the message that was being communicated was one of freedom from the emptiness of sin, and the promise of a profound experience of God’s loving presence.

Now, having said all this, I think a second question comes to mind, when we hear the story of what happened to those disciples. And that question is: What happens when the Spirit comes into *our* lives? Well, the short answer is: We receive gifts we never dreamed of. For example:

Was there ever a time when you, intuitively, knew how to handle a tough situation at work or at home? That's the gift of wisdom.

Was there ever a time when you were able to refrain from responding in anger to another person, long enough to think about what it's like to be in his or her shoes? That's the gift of understanding.

Was there ever a time when you, seemingly out of nowhere, found that you had the words of hope that got to the heart of another person's dilemma? That's the gift of counsel.

Did you ever know someone who had the gumption to persevere in difficult times? They had the gift of fortitude.

Did you ever know someone who seemed to understand that complex problems weren't always solved with simple solutions, and was willing to dig deeper and longer? They had the gift of knowledge.

Did you ever know someone whose very bearing told you that they radically accepted all of life as a gift, and relied on God's help alone? They had the gift of piety.

These gifts of the Holy Spirit, and others, are all around us. And whenever the time is right, or whenever the need is felt, we will experience them. And for the disciples, the time was right when they had spend an anxious night of worry. And suddenly the Holy Spirit of God burst onto the scene, filled their scared and empty hearts, and enabled them to bring to the world the fruits of those gifts they'd just been given.

Which brings me back to Mrs. Donna Stilwell of Concord, Massachusetts. We are all, in some ways, just like she discovered herself to be. There she was, walking around just like anyone else, and yet she had within herself gifts she never imagined. Never in a million years would she have thought that, if the need ever arose, she would be able to lift a two-ton van. And I'm sure that, looking back on that event, she still has a hard time believing that it was actually her.

And, I suspect, that many of those disciples, after spending the remainder of their lives telling their story, and planting new congregations wherever they traveled, had a lot of time during their years of retirement wondering "Was that really me? How in the world did I manage to do all that?"

And, this morning, during the announcements, we are going to take a few moments to express our regard for six young people who are graduating from high school, and making plans for college and the rest of their lives. I find it particularly exciting to think that the Holy Spirit has such excellent material to work with. And I hope I live long enough to be able to hear some of them say, in amazement, “Can you believe what I’ve done?” This is a good day, for them and us, and I think the future bodes well for them all.

Finally, for the rest of us, the Day of Pentecost reminds us that our lives are full of possibility and hope. And it tells us that, one day, and with the help of God’s Holy Spirit, we might live to see ourselves doing things we never imagined possible. Because, thanks be to God, there *really is more* to us than what meets the eye.