
Learning to See

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Pentecost Sunday – Year A

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In his book, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, the neurologist Oliver Sacks tells a story about a patient named Virgil. Virgil was in his early 50s, but he had suffered from cataracts all of his life and had not been able to see for more than 50 years. Sacks had performed a surgery and he had done it well. Suddenly, Virgil was able to see shapes and sizes and colors and light. It was as if a new world had come upon him.

But as Sacks went to visit him, he realized that while Virgil could see these things, there were things he could not see. He had two cats, for example: one male, one female, but each black and white. And while Virgil could see fur and paws and whiskers, he could not tell which cat was which until he touched them. The pathways in his brain that allowed him to see the whole had never developed. So he was getting new information—shapes and colors, sizes, angles, sharp edges, roughness—but he could not put them together in a way that allowed him to see the whole.

His eyes could now see but his brain could not.

This, it strikes me, is also true of the spiritual path. How is it that we learn to see with our brain, with our mind, with our being? We are gifted with eyes that can see shapes and sounds, colors, angles, texture, but how do we learn to put it all together?

The answer, I think, is symbolized in Pentecost. It is the moment when the Holy Spirit descends. The moment when Christmas and Epiphany and Lent and Easter all makes sense. The moment when everything we know about Jesus suddenly comes back as he promised, in the form of the Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter.

Paul tells us take on the mind of Christ. This is the spiritual path, learning how to see with our mind, learning how to see the way Jesus saw. But how do we do that?

Scriptures tell us what to expect of the Spirit: it will come like the wind. There is this sound. It is the same spirit which conveyed wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures, yet different, too. It is the Resurrected Christ.

But it is this Spirit which allows each of us to speak in our own voice, yet all of us to understand. It allows us to see the whole, to take all of these disparate parts and bring them together in something that we can see as the whole. All of these different relationships that need healing and incorporation and integration into the whole.

You'll know it's the spirit because these are the marks. A compassion, a feeling, a creativity where nothing is wasted, nothing is left out, no one is forgotten – the least, the lost, the last are all part of the whole. That is the mark of the Spirit.

And this is what we are offering these candidates for baptism. There will come a time when we will say, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever." There will come a time when all of you will stand up and we will ask, "Will you support these persons?" and you will say loudly and enthusiastically, "We will," because we start this journey by

looking more deeply into ourselves, guided by the spirit.

We start this journey looking out into our families and communities learning how to be in relationships without fear, guided by the Spirit. We continue this journey by walking out into the world, witnessing to the community the faith, the love, that we have experienced, guided by the spirit.

This is what Pentecost is about—not something that happened way back then, but something that is happening now, and can happen tomorrow, and will happen the day after, guided by the spirit.

And it doesn't have to be hard. It doesn't always have to be painful. It doesn't always have to involve a lot of sacrifice, though it will at times. Sometimes it's just fun. Sometimes knowing you're being guided by the Spirit is just fun. Let me give you an example.

It's 1999. Right here at the Cathedral of St. Philip. It's July 4th. Now you know what happens on July 4th. Yes, we celebrate the birthday of the country, but there's a more important thing: the Peachtree Road Race. And that year it was scheduled for Sunday morning. Try getting to church when the Peachtree Road Race is being run during the time of your service.

And so churches along Peachtree predictably reacted unfavorably. "Don't run it in the morning. It'll interfere with church. This is not a godly thing to do."

Except at the Cathedral, where the Dean decided, "You know, if we're going to get all those visitors we're going to welcome them." And so we moved the service from the Nave to the street. And he proceeded to bless the runners using our images of water, using our concepts of blessing, witnessing to our grace and excellence and hospitality.

And we've done it every year since. We have blessings for Muslims. We have blessings for Jews. We even have blessings for Baptists.

We learned how to see, guided by the spirit. And it was fun. And it brought others in. And it witnessed to our faith. It witnessed to the world.

So happy birthday to the church and happy Pentecost to you. Enjoy it. It can be fun, guided by the spirit.

Amen.