

7 March 2009  
 St. Mary's Cathedral  
 Diocesan Convention  
 Memphis, Tennessee  
 Propers for the Holy Spirit  
 Dr. Fredrica Harris Thompsett

"Gifts of the Spirit"

**In the Name of the One God  
 Who liberates, inspires and pursues us. Amen.**

"With the Spirit's Gifts empower us for the work of ministry," so the opening hymn's refrain intones. **Do the Spirit's gifts empower us for the work of ministry?** Will you and I allow the Holy Spirit to empower us, to set us free to go forth newly energized for God's work of ministry?

When I was a child, way back in the 1950's, no one suggested I had a "ministry." Actually the only person who paid any attention to us children at all was the DRE (do you know what a DRE is? DRE means Director of Christian Education). In my parish her name was Diantha, and she recruited me at my ripe old age of 10 years to help out in the Sunday School, to join in teaching others. From that point on I was "hooked" on teaching. I must be, for I've been teaching theology and church history for over forty years. Still I wonder: what did Diantha see? I was described by some as precocious and plopped into the "gifted" track in school. Being "gifted," I knew all too well, basically meant that there would be more homework. Still I do wonder: did the Holy Spirit guide me to the ministry of teaching?

The Holy Spirit: that was another mystery that adults spoke about in Church. Much like the "adult voice over" in a Charlie Brown movie, I thought the Holy Spirit was something only grownups mumbled about. Years later in graduate school I was fortunate to work with a theologian named Paul Tillich (he liked the ladies and I liked his books). One day Tillich both warned and intrigued me when he mentioned that mainline Protestants generally ignored the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> He mumbled something about the Spirit being a bit hard for proper Episcopalians and others to control. I thought whimsically about Paul Tillich this past week as I was contemplating today's Propers for the Holy Spirit. Surely the Holy Spirit empowered Paul Tillich for his work of ministry!

I thought too of another "Paul," the Apostle Paul. This Paul, as my teenage friends would text and email, this Paul is my BFF (best friend forever). I have come to know the Apostle Paul as the preeminent theologian of the Holy Spirit. Paul: the missionary theologian, the guiding mentor of new and emerging churches. Paul: the theologian of community

who labored in conflicted settings yet who longed for unity. Paul: the theologian who identified a generous diversity of gifts at work in ministry. Paul: the theologian who scoffed at the idea of all the most important gifts being located in one person, and challenged the notion of any one person, even an apostle, being "in charge." Paul: the theologian who witnessed and proclaimed the spontaneous expansion of the Spirit. Paul: the theologian who underscored the radical Spirit-empowered character of Baptism (as found in today's Epistle and in his letter to the Galatians). Surely Paul knew almost two millennia ago that "the same Spirit, the One Spirit empowers us with gifts for the work of ministry!"

Yet do we really believe this, or are we Episcopalians too "proper" to embrace fully this uncontrollable, highly Spirited companion? Are we tempted -- perhaps with some misguided measure of Lenten restraint -- to "mute" the Holy Spirit's power in our lives? If so, then to use an appropriate proverb, I believe we are looking a gift horse in the mouth. Why do some of us question the value of something we have already received for free? Are we, as another hymn text puts it, "hoarding as private treasure all that [God] so freely gives?"

I invite you for a moment to consider gifts for ministry that we have already received from the Holy Spirit. This is not Paul's list. This is my initial working list of five gifts that God bathes us with from our Spirit-soaked baptisms onward. As I contemplate these gifts, I invite you, each of you, to let your hearts be drenched with gratitude for God's astounding and Spirited generosity:

1) **The Gift of "being in Christ."** This is the preeminent gift that binds God and humanity together. In Paul's letters this one Spirit brings the one presence of Christ to us. Today new scholars and theologians are reminding us what Paul knew all along. From the point of view of Scripture, the Spirit is dynamically involved with Jesus' birth, baptism, and ministry.<sup>ii</sup> Through the Spirit we are more than just a community; we participate in the ongoing life of the risen Christ.

2) **The Gift of Freedom.** . . . Paul reminds us in Galatians and Corinthians that we are all made to drink of one Spirit in Baptism, all refreshed from the same fountain. As John Dominic Crossan confirms<sup>iii</sup> this baptismal gift of freedom was revolutionary and uncompromising in Paul's day. And we know it remains an essential and sought after gift for many in our global village.

3) **The gift of a level playing field.** . . . Holy Baptism proclaims a radical transformation of human relations. As we heard in today's Epistle, in baptism we are enrolled in a community without prejudicial divisions. Baptism overcomes all that alienates and separates human beings from one another and from God. Baptism both embraces our incarnational differences and signifies God's promise of equality before Christ.<sup>iv</sup> In Paul's time as now,

Baptism highlighted a necessary renegotiation of authority, one that precludes dominance and oppression.

4) **The gift of companionship that does not evade suffering.** As we know, perhaps more particularly in these challenging times, being born of water and of Spirit does not free us from struggle, terror, or loss. Yet as Paul reminds us, this self-same Spirit intercedes in hard times “with sighs too deep for words.” (Romans 8:26) This Advocate, this treasured Companion, dwells with us throughout our length of days.

5) **The gift of being uncontrollably present.** A former colleague of mine describes “the Spirit [as] always there, closer to us than we are to ourselves, closer than kissing, constantly begging permission to pray in us,” to pray with us, to dwell lovingly among us.<sup>v</sup> In short, God the Holy Spirit is a profligate lover!

“Will the Spirit’s gifts empower us for the work of ministry?” The truly Good News is that we do not have to ask the Holy Spirit into our lives. She is already there; she is there when we open ourselves to God’s transforming and energizing love. She is there companionship us as we imagine new and emerging ways of being followers of Christ. She is unconditionally there liberating, inspiring, and pursuing us, each and every one of us, to go forth in Christ. *Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> See Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* [sermons], (1948).

<sup>ii</sup> See, for example, Kilian McDonnell, *The Other Hand of God: The Holy Spirit as the Universal Touch and Goal* (2003).

<sup>iii</sup> John Cominic Crossan, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus’ Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Reign* (2004).

<sup>iv</sup> Fredrica Harris Thompsett, *Living with History, The New Churches Teaching Series* (1999).

<sup>v</sup> Drawn from a lecture by Sarah Coakley, a theologian formerly at Harvard Divinity School.