

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” PENTECOST SUNDAY
Acts 2: 1-11 Psalm 104 I Cor 12: 3b--7, 12-13 John 20: 19-23
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

There are these "Angel Cards" on sale in book stores and memorabilia shops. The package consists of a box of small cards with an instructional sheet. According to the directions, you are supposed to sit quietly for a moment and invite your angel to be with you and guide you. Then you pick a card from the batch. Each card has a virtue or gift written on it, a different one for each day, e.g., tranquility, perseverance, trust, forgiveness, etc. They sound a lot like the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit. The one you choose is either the gift you are supposed to practice or desire for the day. People buy these cards who may not believe in a spirit world of angels or of any divine principal behind their lives. Yet they participate in the practice. The cards are popular with my eleven-year-old niece---I gave her the cards! Whether people believe or not, their use of the cards shows a desire to be more centered and in charge of their lives. Maybe they are also showing a hunger for what they do not have or are struggling to have. The cards may show a desire to be more human and responsible for our actions. They also express, for some at least, a recognition of a need they cannot meet themselves and so need help.

So, suppose the congregation gathered on this Sunday were invited to imagine a big basket in the sanctuary filled with "Spirit cards." If they were asked to come forward to choose a card that named a gift from the Spirit for them, what card would they like to choose? What would be the gift they needed now that most addressed a hunger within them? Gathered for Eucharist as we are, is a chance for each person to implore the Spirit for what each needs and also an opportunity to think about and ask for the gifts the community may need at this time to be a more authentic Christian community.

In addition— If each person were reminded of some particular need he/she felt, then all would be unified by a shared experience of hunger and need. We would be united because we had admitted dependence on Another, the One who sends the Spirit on Pentecost with gifts for us. And not only gifts for us as individuals, but gifts for the whole community, the kinds of gifts that would "fire" us to be a strong, outspoken witnesses to the world.

If today our community identified and expressed its needs we could feel a strong identification with the community gathered on that first Pentecost. This new community began knowing it was very dependent on God. It was a vulnerable community, locked away in fear. No wonder the symbols of the reading are so strong---- fire and wind---- for it would take strong forces to change them and mold them into the community Jesus had prayed for at the Last Supper. We talk about and sometimes idealize the unity and sharing of the early church. But notice, it was fear that initially united them! Then, God intervened, and it was faith that now made them one.

The group is huddled together and afraid. Maybe there is already the potential for strength in that fact that they were at least together. They could be some support to each other, each would know that they were not alone, isolated in their feelings. Our human spirits are drained when we think we are alone and the only one feeling what we feel. The place that John calls "the world" is a hostile place to be, especially when we are feeling weak and overwhelmed. We need each other during frightening and difficult times. Perhaps Pentecost suggests that when we gather with one another and share these fears and struggles, then the Spirit is present and has an opening to work and bring healing and courage. Those of us who can acknowledge our feelings, or who are going through difficult times against strong forces might be encouraged to seek out others for help and support. Notice the success of the 12 Step programs where people admit they are powerless to overcome their addictions and turn to others and a "higher power" for help. Doesn't that dynamic leave an opening for the entrance of the Spirit? It is in the community's exchange that the Spirit may come.

What often is the effect of fear in our lives? ---inactivity and avoidance. I see a large barking dog and respond by crossing the street or taking another route. The disciples responded to their fears of the Jewish authorities by hiding out. As followers of Jesus, they had reason to be afraid. They could expect to happen to them what had happened to Jesus. In the Middle East, then and even now in many places, it wasn't the usual practice to lock the doors. In this culture there was great care to protect the vulnerable, but privacy was not the important thing it is today for us. The disciples are hiding and with them the message of the Resurrection is locked away. Jesus greets them with "Peace." Jesus' greeting is more than just a wish for them. It is an expression of a truth: his Resurrection has changed the way things are, believers in the resurrection have nothing to fear. And so, his greeting is really a statement of what they and we have, peace---with each other, withing

ourselves and with God. We already possess peace.

Many organizations are devising "Mission Statements," not just religious organizations, but large companies and small businesses as well. (I saw a mission statement posted in a dry cleaners recently!) If we were to write a mission statement for our parish, would it have the qualities, goals and hopes that characterize this first Christian community described in Acts? The preacher might want to read the parish mission statement, if there is one, to the congregation this day. It probably is a statement that expresses ideals that can only be met if we are a community aware of our needs and gathered in hope of the Spirit's coming with fire and wind.

Or, the preacher might try writing a mission statement for the congregation and reading it to them. It could be personal and honest. Here's what I might say: "On our own we would be fearful and locked up, a private club of sorts. But we are a Spirit filled community and so we have opened our doors to whomever would hear our message, which is the message of Christ, and take it to heart. We rejoice that others, newly arrived, feel welcome among us. We embrace your gifts and want to make room for you so that we all could grow together as one gifted and united community of Jesus' disciples ever ready to share the message and our lives with others. We invite you to join us to join in continuing the Spirit of Jesus in the world, so that the hungry may be fed, the sick and imprisoned visited, the naked clothed and all might come to experience the forgiveness Christ has breathed upon us."

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QUOTABLE

Everyday Mysticism. ...the experience of the Spirit I talk of here is also to be found in a mysticism of everyday life outside a verbalized and institutionalized Christianity and therefore may be discovered by Christian in their lives when the encounter their non-Christian brothers and sisters, or in their study of religious history, Christians need not be shocked or astonished at such a revelation. It should serve only to show that their God, the God of Jesus Christ, wants all men and women to be saved, and offers God's grace as liberation to all human beings, offering it as liberation into incomprehensible mystery. The grace of Christ takes effect in a mysterious way...and...allows people to share in the paschal mystery of Jesus, even where people who are loyal to their conscience have not yet been reached in any convincing way by the explicit message of Christianity and have not been molded by the Christian sacraments.

—Karl Rahner, quoted in LIVING PULPIT, Volume 5, No.1

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”

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