

The Day of Pentecost Year C 2007
Acts 2:1–21 or Genesis 11:1–9
Psalm 104:25–35, 37b
Romans 8:14–17 or Acts 2:1–21
John 14:8–17, (25–27)

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
on Sunday May 27th 2007 by the Reverend Richard Smiraglia**

Jesus said: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

How is it that you came to believe in Christ? How did you know, in a single moment, with absolute certainty, that you believe in Christ? I think this is a compelling question for Pentecost, because I rather suspect none of us had the kind of experience we just heard about in the Acts of the Apostles. Did your hair catch on fire when you first believed? Did you start to talk funny? Did the neighbors think you were intoxicated? At 9 in the morning? Most likely not.

Maybe I need to ask whether you have decided that you believe in Christ Many of us are not so certain all the time. We probably are pretty sure we believe in God. After all, everywhere I go I hear people saying "Oh God." It must mean something! Believing in God is probably the easy part, because it just seems important to believe that there is somehow a unity that underlies all of creation. And most of us either believe in a god who is a Zen-like source of energy, or we believe in a really old guy with long gray hair who is running the whole world like a puppet show. Most of us probably believe in the Holy Spirit, although we are probably less certain what we think that means. We know those moments when we feel the presence of God—it is palpable, real, immediate—those moments are ours given by the Holy Spirit.

But what about Jesus? The truth is I probably cannot even answer this question myself. I know that I do believe in Jesus Christ. I know that I believe so deeply that I know, as Jesus says, that He is in me and I am in Him and God is in us and we are in God. But I do not remember when or how I came to believe. It is too much a part of my soul for me to dissect.

And, of course, this was true even of Jesus' own disciples. Our gospel reading opens with yet another challenge to Jesus from a disciple. Now if you were one of Jesus' hearty band, and you had walked all over the country with Jesus, sweating and hunting each night for a place to sleep and food enough to eat ... and you had been with him when he raised Lazarus from the dead, and when he fed 5000 with a little bread and fish, and you had watched him flogged in the public square and crucified ... and then he came to you in the upper room How could you go through all of that and still not get it? But that is exactly what we have. Philip says to Jesus "prove it" and Jesus says: "You still do not know me?"

As I said I do not know how I would answer my own question. I know that I know inside of me that I am in Christ and Christ is in me. I know that in Holy Week I suffer each step of the way. I know that at Christmas my heart bursts with joy that God is with us—Immanuel. I know that in tough moments I identify with God who became human and subject to frailty ...

I had occasion recently to talk with a colleague about a little book called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It is about as close to Zen as Christians get—it is a book about spiritual contemplation, about what it means to know God in your soul. The point of the cloud metaphor is that we must so empty ourselves that we achieve a state of "nothing," for that is where we will find God.

So this week I dug out my copy to look up some things. And when I started flipping through I found this place where the pages were torn on the left and the right. And I remembered how that happened. It was during seminary, about twelve years ago, and I had just won an alumni of the year award from Indiana University so I had flown there for a weekend of celebration. I had made a great speech all about how I typed my term paper in a tornado even as my cat implored me to take cover. You had to know the professor involved ...

Anyway, on the flight back to New York the landing gear failed to come down. And after circling for a very long time the first officer came back in the plane and lay down on the floor. He ripped up the carpet. Then he moved some wooden slats. Then he opened the metal so he could lean down to see whether the gear was actually down. Then he left as it was (he said this was for the investigators)

and then he went back to the cockpit. They told us they couldn't tell whether it was down or not but they were out of fuel so we had to land.

And I went through this little battle in my head. I was still a year from ordination. If you ever want to test your faith all you have to do is go to seminary. Here in the middle of my crisis of faith was this real crisis. I remember thinking to myself "Oh God." Then I remember thinking I should pray. But my rational mind kicked in and said don't be silly, brace yourself. Then my soul kicked in and said really don't be silly now is the time—PRAY! So I prayed with The Cloud of Unknowing in my hands. And when the plane touched down I pushed my thumbs through the book on both sides. (By the way, it turned out the wheels were down.)

So was that a moment when I believed? I think so. I remember taking a very expensive taxi from LaGuardia back to the seminary and rushing to the Chapel to pray. It was a galvanizing moment. Was I in real danger? I will never know—probably not. But I was existentially terrified. At the core of my being I was scared. And there, in the core of your being, is where you will meet Jesus.

In the letter to the Romans Paul says that all who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. Do you remember when you first loved your birth parents? Of course you don't. You weren't even born yet. But it was when you slept inside your mother's womb and the voices you heard were those of creation itself. Or maybe you were adopted and you first knew the love of your parents when you felt the love they gave to you freely and unfettered in their embrace and response to your every cry. This is what Paul is trying to tell us my friends. We know Jesus is with us because he is within us. We know this in our very beings as children know their parents. "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." We do not need fire on our heads or to talk in tongues to know that God loves us, that we are God's children, and that Jesus is our Savior.

Jesus finally says to his disciples that he will send them help, the Holy Spirit as an advocate. And see, he has done just that. The Spirit of God is always near us, guiding us, waiting like a mother waiting to nurse her newborn child. And Jesus said: "If you love me, you will

keep my commandments.” That turns out to be the hard part. He commanded us to love God. And he commanded us to love one another. It is hard to love God. Most of us never bother unless we are in need. And how is it that we are to love one another? In all of our difference?

The answer is simple enough, as simple as it is hard. Give up control. Seek until you find “nothingness.” Listen to what God is saying to you. Look inside your own heart. There you will see Jesus. There you will see your faith. There you will see your salvation. Jesus said: “ Peace I leave with you ... do not let your hearts be troubled.” Amen.

© Church of the Holy Trinity Rittenhouse Square. All rights reserved.