

The Rev. Anne Michele Turner
Pentecost, Year C (June 5, 2022)
Acts 2:1-21
Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria, Virginia

How are we supposed to do church? It's been just over a year since we returned to the nave, and I have been asking this question for the whole time. Do we sit here, or there? Do we sing or speak? I've had virtually no baseline and so, honestly, a lot of the time no clue. I've asked many of you the question and you have asked me, how do we do church?

Really, we're caught in a bigger question. How do we do *life*? We have all lost the baseline. We are constantly trying to figure out when and where to wear a mask (or not), when and where to give a hug (or not). People have forgotten how to merge onto the highway. Kids in schools have moved up two grades since the pandemic started, but they are stuck socially at the same place as they were two years ago. Nothing is the right size for any of us anymore. How do we do life?

Fifty days after Easter, the disciples were asking these questions, too. Jesus had risen from the dead, which was great news, and then he ascended into heaven, and that was great news, too. And then . . . how to do church? How to do life? The disciples did the easy thing, which was the familiar thing. They went back to Jerusalem and they stuck together. They even had a little church council to choose a replacement for Judas, almost like they are getting their bylaws in order.

I don't mean to throw shade at the disciples here, because they are doing what we all do. They are doing the thing they have always done. They are doing the thing that's worked before. They are doing what makes sense. They are playing it safe, which is not a bad thing.

But it's small. And God is great. And the greatness of God shows up and literally sets their hair on fire.

The book of Acts tells us that three things happened. This wind blew through the place. Tongues of fire shows up on each person's head. And then—most importantly—everybody was “filled with the Holy Spirit”—something that shows up as being able to speak a whole bunch of other languages but is so much more than just linguistic fluency.

What are we supposed to do with this awesome, terrifying, marvelous freak show?

A lot of people will point to the seeds of mission that are in all of those different languages. Clearly, this moment shows us how the early church is prepared to spread around the world. But it's about more than just skills for evangelism. It shows us the tremendous diversity of God and God's people. Each of the people gathered there is unique and irreplaceable in their difference.

What I see in this moment is a powerful testimony that God's creativity is vast and God's imagination is far bigger than ours. When the Holy Spirit shows up, we see that it's possible to be different, that even if things don't look the way they have always looked, there's a whole new kind of good that no one has imagined yet.

Do we worship like that's true? Do we live like that's true? We have, on this day, an invitation to show up as our full selves. Are we accepting that invitation?

Now, don't hear this as a prelude to doing something wacky with our liturgy. We're not going to be all groovy. I love our traditional liturgy, as I know so many of you do, and after all the work it took to get back in this place, you are going to have to pry my hands off our altar to get me to leave it.

But this liturgy should not and cannot be a cage for the Holy Spirit. It is a perch for God's presence to light on when we ask that spirit to come among us. And we should never treat the liturgy like it's a cage for us, either. However it is that the Holy Spirit comes into your heart in this place—whether it's making you cross yourself or genuflect or be silent or even say Amen right out loud—that Spirit is welcome. What we do in worship doesn't have to be all the same to be good and holy.

The same thing that is true of our worship is true of our lives. Lots of times we fall into the trap of thinking that there is one way to be—one way to be a good Christian, or a good parent, or a good spouse, or a good citizen, or a good worker, or a good friend. There's not. There are as many ways to lead Spirit-filled lives as there are people to live them. God's gift of the Holy Spirit is in you. You can't borrow it from anyone else.

The early church writer Irenaeus explained it this way: the glory of God is the human being fully alive. Do you glorify God?

The invitation of Pentecost is to come back to life. We might think we don't know how to live now, that we don't have the insight or the wisdom or the understanding to know who or how to be. But you don't have to learn those things. You have already been given them, implanted in your soul. The deepest, God-given impulses show you the way. The Spirit has embedded a compass in each one of us to follow. Perhaps that's just theological way of saying, listen to your heart. I believe God has already taken up residence there.

This day marks the end of the Easter season. We started two months ago with the stone rolled away from the tomb. And we end this day, still, with the invitation to come out of the cave. Be alive. 100% exactly as you are. If you have been showing up for church or for life with a filter on, take it off. Recognize who God has made you to be and what God has given you to share.

The Holy Spirit teaches us the virtue of boldness in honor of God.

How do we do this life? With courage. As free people. As people created by God and loved by God and sustained by God every single day. It is awesome and terrifying and marvelous and more than a little freaky at times. But it is the gift that God offers us—you and me and every other person on this planet. We each have this spark of the divine to tend and to heed.

Pay attention to yours. Let that Spirit grow in you and fill you and blow your heart open. The world doesn't need you to be small and safe, especially not right now. Let yourself grow to fill in God's dream, and watch God's dream get lived out in you.