

Sermon by: Bishop Anne Germond

Pentecost: 2017 – St. Brice's North Bay Confirmation

Danielle, Tracy, Paula, Kysten, Rose, John, Tammy and Stacey, and dear friends at St. Brice's it is so good to be here with you this morning in a church that's all dressed in Pentecost red, and on a feast day when some of you will be confirmed in your faith and when others will be officially received into the Anglican Church.

Today has been so important for your rector, Rev Peter that his invitation for the bishop to come to St. Brice's was extended long before the consecration. In fact I think Liz might have put him on hold and said...she hasn't even bought a 2017 diary yet! Thank you Rev. Peter for your eagerness to teach and to nurture your parishioners in their faith and for your faithful leadership. He and I and others have been praying for each of you candidates by name in the weeks leading up to today.

My prayer has been that as hands are laid on you that you will know something of what the first followers of Jesus experienced on Pentecost and that as the winds of the Holy Spirit take up space in your life that your life will be transformed and that you will made more and more into the image and likeness of Christ. And that you will hear the voice of God saying to you in many ways and through many voices...you are my beloved son, my beloved daughter with you I am well pleased.

As I've been preparing for today's feast I've also been thinking about the rest of the Diocese of Algoma gathered for their Pentecost celebrations. In some congregations parishioners are invited to wear the colours of fire, while in others the nave is decorated with red, yellow and orange balloons to create a partylike atmosphere. In others there's a birthday cake at the end of the service to commemorate the birthday of the church. We all know the huge amount of work and energy and effort that it takes to orchestrate a feast day like today's.

The Pentecost party described in the second Chapter of Acts was the party that birthed the church, and like every really good party the planning of it had been in the works since the beginning of time. The poetry of Genesis 1 describes God's creative spirit blowing over the formless void, and Genesis 2 tells us about the life giving breath of God. Much later, as one group the people of God find themselves in exile in Babylon, and others find their lives shattered in Israel, the prophet Isaiah speaks to them and promises the coming of one on whom the Spirit of God will

rest – the “spirit of wisdom and understanding”, of “counsel and might”, of “knowledge and the fear of the Lord”.

During the time of domination and abuse by the Roman Empire, Luke records John’s promise of one who will baptize by the Spirit, and Jesus later agrees. In the extensive planning of this Pentecost party the Spirit of YHWH has woven together the generations through his life giving Spirit, a spirit that brings life out of death, hope out of despair. This was true for the exiles in Babylon and it continues to be true for us today.

On the night before he died Jesus promised his frightened follows that he would send us his Holy Spirit, the Advocate and comforter so that through the HS he would be with us, always. Jesus wasn’t promising just a vague spiritual presence; he promised us HIS presence. The promised presence of Christ, that dynamic divine descent of the Holy Spirit could have happened anywhere, at any other time than a meeting of church folks – who thought they were getting together to celebrate an historic festival of their faith – the giving of the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. It was a party they were there for – but they were not expecting problems with shaking foundations, doors torn off hinges, rushing wind, and tongues of fire. But that’s what happened. One can just imagine the guests at the first wild Pentecost party standing around commenting on the chicken and dumplings and cheap red wine they had for dinner the night before, their crowded hotel room, and all the while exchanging stories about events that had happened in their lives since last Pentecost, remarking about the size of the crowd at this year’s gathering, and how noisy the Elamites and Persians are this year. But mostly just waiting for the same old thing to happen as last year.

But that’s not what happened. There was a noise, a rushing wind, tongues of fire appearing on everyone’s heads, people able to understand each other, and a church born. Nothing was ever the same for those first church members, and it continues today as we celebrate the birthday of the church and continue to witness Christ’s presence with us. The Holy Spirit gave birth to the church – in wind and fire – and the Holy Spirit continues to inspire, prod and birth the church in holy wind and life giving fire.

There seems to be something about the Holy Spirit that loves to intrude and disrupt church parties – I know that you’ve seen it over and over again at St. Brice’s as God has called you over the years to be missionally minded and focused. I remember being on the Executive committee a few years ago when you presented your ideas about going ahead with all the renovations and upgrades as required by the fire department. I also know that the decision to move forward was one that was made prayerfully and carefully with the Spirits guiding and leading and that it required a great deal of sacrifice and commitment. But the promise of Pentecost is that we are never alone. God does not leave us to our own devices. We don’t have to be church by ourselves. I believe that was evidenced in that moment in your church’s history, but on other occasions also

I don’t know if you have heard this but in the old Celtic tradition the HS is not represented as we usually find him (or her) as a white dove, tame and pure, but, are you ready for it - by a wild goose!

Geese are not controllable, they make a lot of noise and have a habit of biting those who try to contain them. Geese fly faster in a flock than on their own, and they can be disruptive!

Pentecost is the wild goose of a Peter who just weeks before was unable to say one faithful word about Christ when confronted by people in the courtyard before Jesus’s crucifixion. Now Peter boldly preaches! You will remember that he was an uneducated fisherman and yet his first words as the ‘Rock’ on which Christ would build his church are courageous and sound. According to Peter, the giving of the Spirit was nothing less than the advent of a new age inaugurated by the Holy Spirit. In former days, the Spirit was given to a few individuals, prophets empowered to speak God’s truth. But there would come a day, prophesied Joel, when God’s Spirit would be poured out on all. That Spirit flood would result in prophetic sons and daughters, visionary young people and old folks daring to dream. Everyone, even those who were previously voiceless and hopeless would be enabled to speak out in God’s name.

The noisy goose of Pentecost in our day are men like Jean Vanier who started the L’Arche homes so that people with developmental difficulties could live in communities where love was real, breaking down barriers between people..

Perhaps you are one of the noisy geese of Pentecost in our time who has experienced that Spirit flood and now offers time as a volunteer at the teen lunch here on Fridays, or the community food bank on another day. I've seen some of you noisy geese serving dinner at the Open Arms café, and I know others volunteer in the North Bay hospital. Other Pentecost geese are less noisy but effective just the same as they teach or listen or pray with those who are hurting or broken. There are many Pentecost geese in this congregation, people who refuse to sit still, but waddle right in where others would fear to tread, make a difference in their corner of the world.

The Pentecost goose is the disruption that was caused in one church in Algoma on a snowy Sunday morning in January by a loud rattling at the locked side door which is never opened. It was disturbing for the congregation that someone would try to come into the service in the middle of the sermon. No one went to see who was there but a few moments later an old woman dressed in a long coat, heavy boots and scarf walked right into the sanctuary and announced loudly to the sidespeople. "Did you all mean to lock that door out there? It took me forever to find one that was open. Don't mind me now – I just want a place to get warm and I'll be off." The service continued but not in the same way as before – the Pentecost goose had disrupted things just enough.

And sometimes when it's just too painful to really listen to the news when it tells us that in the world 1.2 billion people live in absolute poverty and that 800 million people, 200 million of them children are hungry all the time, the Pentecost geese see those hungry children, and go out of their way to feed them, to make sure that the children in their world begin their school day with a decent breakfast and that they don't have to go to sleep at night hungry.

Today, as you Danielle, Tracy, Paula, Kysten, Rose, John, Tammy and Stacey, are confirmed in your faith or welcomed into our church I pray that you will often hear the noise of the Pentecost goose honking at you and disrupting your everyday ordinary life and transforming you into courageous witnesses like Peter.

That honk is the noisy, Pentecostal spirit sounding the original note of responsibility and recalling to our minds once again those unnerving stories of the Good Samaritan, thereby reminding us that the heart of the Gospel calls us to cross over to the other

side of the road, where we would rather not be, or to give of our material possessions so that someone else may have enough to eat for one day.

I think the Celts were on to something. We should pay attention to them and take a second look at Pentecost, which is not a sweet feast of gentle doves lulling us to self-satisfaction. It is, as they realized a feast of geese, noisy, dirty geese who shout for the Lord, bite those who would exploit the weak, and gather in community for worship and effectiveness.

The next time you hear geese flying overhead, think of Pentecost and the church, and your life as a disciple on whom the Spirit has descended. Think of what you must do to live as a disciple. Because in the end Pentecost is nothing if it is only a party one Sunday a year with coloured balloons in the nave of the church. It must translate into transformed lives filled with the life giving power of the Holy Spirit.

Think if you will of some of the symbols of Pentecost, the red for passion, fire for action, and a common language of mercy and compassion that will quiet the babble of voices in despair. Passion, fire, mercy and compassion; that's what Pentecost is all about. And honking prophets who remind us that those are the marks of the Church yesterday when it was founded, and are with us today and will be forever.