

Mass of the Holy Spirit

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We gathered in this church one year ago today in fear and shock at a crime whose enormity and malevolence was beyond our comprehension. We gathered here in grief and anxiety. We mourned with the families and friends of those who lost their lives in the conflagrations of September 11. We were anxious for rescue workers and for those who might be scapegoated for these horrendous crimes. We worried that our leaders would too quickly “cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war.”

We gathered with a heightened sense of our vulnerability as a nation and of our own human frailty. For the first time, this country experienced violence on a scale previously unknown to us, but all too familiar to too many people around the world. We realized that our own lives could be snuffed out in a moment’s madness. Perhaps we revisited our values and priorities, moved by those final messages from cell phones and on answering machines and by the sight of people jumping hand in hand from the World Trade Towers in a final desperate expression of human solidarity. We gathered here because we were lost and afraid, weak and vulnerable, angry and disoriented. Where else could we go?

Sean Heeran’s brother, Charlie, was a firefighter killed in the World Trade Center. We may hear ourselves in Sean’s comments. “I go,” he said, “to St. Patrick’s Cathedral ... because I feel it’s my brother’s home now. I go there to see him. I just go there and light a candle and buy him and his buddies a beer. I throw a couple of bucks in the little thing, I buy him a beer because just – I go to visit him.” Where else could he go?

We do not come here for easy explanations of the mystery of evil as manifest in the tragedies of September 11, as it is in the fratricides of the Middle East, Central Africa, and Northern Ireland or the ravages of the AIDS pandemic or the scourge of global hunger. No hollow reassurances from the pulpit that “God’s in his heaven and all’s right with the world.”

Psychologists tell us that we affiliate under stress; we turn to one other in the face of a common threat or traumatic grief. The Catholic theological tradition tells us that together we constitute the one body of Christ; we are originally and inextricably linked to one another, and only subsequently driven apart. We are primarily one, and only secondarily many. The story of Babel underscores this profound truth. To separate the human family, to sow discord and misunderstanding among peoples runs counter to the God who created us all equally human, equally entitled to a fair share of this world’s goods.

The second reading today is the story of fearful disciples of Jesus transformed into courageous apostles who boldly address the crowds, and are understood – in a stunning reversal of Babel -- by persons of every race, language, and way of life. The Spirit of God turns frightened followers into courageous advocates of reconciliation and forgiveness among peoples.

The God in whose presence we assemble today is the omni-lingual God who speaks in every human heart, calling us to be one with all men and women as God is one. We stand before the God whose Spirit impels us to “affiliate” with one another always and forever, not just under stress or trauma. We witnessed God’s Spirit working through those rescue workers and volunteers who plunged into the fiery inferno of the World Trade Center with no thought other than helping those trapped within. We witnessed God’s Spirit at work in those family members of the victims of September 11 who brought a message of peace and reconciliation to Afghanistan when they met with their counterparts who lost their loved ones during the U.S. bombing campaign.

We worship a God whose Spirit calls us from out of our tiny separate worlds into a universe badly scarred and marred by war, hatred, violence, and injustice. We worship the God whose Spirit calls us to unite the scattered and battered children of God, to speak the language of the many tongued God. This Monday, a USF nursing student looked back on his summer experiences in Guatemala and remembered his halting conversations in broken Spanish with *campesinos* as “attempts to cross the line – to reinforce connections with one another.” God erases the lines that we draw between us. Rabbi Irwin Kula told his television audience that the real Torah, the real religious tradition, the real experience behind religion is about love and is about connection and is no more complicated than that.

While our emotions are less raw than they were a year ago and our memories have softened, we gather again to listen to the word of God, to sing in solidarity, to share bread and wine, to draw strength from one another’s company, to celebrate God’s promise to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and to join hands and wish God’s peace to one another. Where else can we go?

We go from this church to our broken world and fractured lives and try to put the pieces together, perhaps more slowly and carefully for what we have done here. We leave here in the faith and hope that God’s Spirit of unity and reconciliation will animate our lives and this university and connect us to the world at large.

We may see in the image of a couple leaping hand in hand to their deaths, as did one commentator, an affirmation of a greatness within our humanity itself that somehow shines in the midst of darkness, the flowering of seeds within our humanity that contain the hint of a possibility of a power greater than death itself. We affirm that power today. We leave here knowing that if God cannot spare us pain and suffering, God is the final word and that word is love and life, not death and destruction. Today and every day when we reach out to hold the hand of a brother or sister in pain, we grasp the hand of God.