

Mass of the Holy Spirit
August 22, 2016
Saint Ignatius Church

Homily by Rev. Paul J. Fitzgerald, S.J.

Today we celebrate the Mass of the Holy Spirit, a four and a half centuries long tradition lived out at the hundreds of Jesuit schools around the world, when we ask for God's blessings and God's guidance as we start a new academic year.

The University of San Francisco is linked historically and culturally with such fine academic institutions as Georgetown and Boston College. We are also a sister institution to Sogang University in Seoul, Sophia in Tokyo, the Javeriana in Bogota, Hekima College in Nairobi, or the Gregorian in Rome. We share a family resemblance to them even as we are unique and distinct, given our location, our diversity, our history and our trajectory.

And if we are part of a truly global network of institutions of higher education, USF by its own right is also quite intentionally international in our composition and in our outlook. Located in the heart of a world-class city, we welcome students from 49 states and 87 countries from all around the world.

We seek to study the many disciplines of Arts and Sciences, of Business and Management, of Nursing and Health Care, of Education and Law, through a Catholic lens that takes in the whole of the human family and of the full spectrum of human identities and experiences.

As a Jesuit school, we seek to impart to every one of our students the skills and the curiosity and the confidence to cross invisible boundaries and to enter respectfully into the life-world of a peer who comes from another society, from another language group, from another culture, or from another faith tradition.

We seek to form global citizens in a world that issues no global passports and in which bad actors are telling us to fear the other, keep out the other, take advantage of the other, objectify the stranger as a threat to be parried rather than a friend to be made. In a city famous for its bridges, we seek to build connections that enrich us all. Such is the daunting and wonderful work that we have embraced as our mission here at USF.

The readings for the liturgy this afternoon help us, I think, enter more deeply into the complexity of our project, identify some of the pitfalls and traps, and reinforce our desire to succeed at what we have engaged.

The first reading, from the book of Genesis, is an ancient exploration – via mythic storytelling, of the reason for the multiplicity of human languages. The ancient Israelites spoke Hebrew, a Semitic language with linguistic cousins such as Aramaic and Canaanite among the languages spoken by tribes and peoples in the region.

Over many centuries, the Israelites were conquered and enslaved by peoples speaking Coptic Egyptian, Akkadian, Greek and Latin. Language in the Ancient world was as much a means for economic and social activity within a community as it was a means of defense against hostile neighboring communities.

And so we have the story of the tower of Babel. It says less about God, I think, than it does about human beings. If we could only cooperate, we would be able to accomplish great things. If we could only understand each other, we could build a wonderful society.

If we could only celebrate our common humanity, we would live in peace. But we don't. And that's the point.

Not that God fears a united humanity, as the myth-maker would have it.

But since the author was working on the premise that human beings descended from a single couple, a single family, then the diversity of languages and cultures and religions, all of which led to hostility and competition, must have been the result of the disintegration of the original unity.

Indeed, the religious imagination of ancient Israel that posited an original unity of humankind is one of the most powerful and hopeful theological notions of their tradition. They also posited that the original and natural state of human affairs was, before the entrance of sin and death, that men and women were equal, that humans were at peace with nature and the many other creatures, and that there was an easy friendship between humans and God.

After the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden and the beginning of human history, the story goes, there is enmity between persons, between genders, and between communities, and much of salvation history is about human waywardness and God's endless attempts to get our attention and to heal our relationships, even and especially with God.

In every human tongue, God speaks through prophets and holy people. In every human religious tradition, God inspires people in their prayers to open themselves up to a grander vision of God, and a grander vision of what it means to be human.

In every human heart, God beckons, invites and empowers the person to believe that they are beloved of God.

But the rough times, the disappointments, the betrayals, the setbacks – these human experiences of limitation, of finitude, of imperfection, these can conspire to close our ears to God’s whispered words of encouragement, God’s gifts of intuition, insight, hope, faith, trust, kindness...

The Gospel scene we heard this evening was such a moment. The disciples, Jesus’ friends, are gathered in a room behind a locked door, afraid that the police would come for them, afraid that the crowd might jeer at them – or worse. Too, they were emotionally crushed because their friend Jesus, the one they thought was the messiah, the one on whom they had pinned their hopes, he had been tried and convicted, humiliated and executed. And with him died their hope, and so they had reverted to the normal human state of fear, isolation and suspicion.

And suddenly, Jesus is with them, alive again, alive forever, and he is giving them his very spirit, a spirit of faith, hope and love, a spirit of wisdom and courage, a spirit of judgment and forgiveness, a spirit of peace. This moment is the beginning of the process whereby the disciples and the crowds who had followed Jesus would become the Church.

But it would take time. They needed time to absorb that what they saw on Calvary was not the end. The cross and the death and the burial, which seemed so absolute, was not the end. Injustice was not the end. Disappointment was not the end.

In the days and weeks that followed, the disciples had a series of experiences of the Risen Lord.

For some it was slow; for others it came more quickly, but over time, courage replaced fear, hope replaced despair, and love replaced the ache of a broken heart. Soon enough, they unlocked the door and went back out into the streets, the marketplace, the towns and the cities. They shared their conviction that what God has been saying all along, always and everywhere, to all of us and to everyone, in quiet and mysterious ways, is absolutely true. We are all loved. We are all called. We are empowered to heal the world of sin and division.

The confusion of Babel is healed by the gift of the Holy Spirit, Who empowers us to welcome, embrace and connect with people from all cultures, all languages, all walks of life. Can we follow the first disciples in this rebirth of hope? Can we follow them into this new paradigm, one in which radical hospitality triumphs?

And if love wins, then what does that say about the terrible divisions, the fear and the fear mongering, that surround us?

We in our great diversity must found our own community, and find our commonality as children of God, and from that unity in our diversity, we must be the change that we wish to see in the world.

Indeed - we must be agents of that change.