

Acts 2: 1 – 21  
1 Cor. 12: 3b – 13  
John 20: 19 – 23  
Pentecost, Yr A

The Rev. Dr. Dennis S. Tierney  
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church  
Bainbridge Island, Washington  
May 11, 2008

### **“It’s Not in the Pencil”**

I was in the third grade when I realized that I did not understand arithmetic very well. The other parts of my school day seemed to go quite swimmingly as reading came easily to me, spelling was fun, and history and geography were interesting to me. It was that dreaded period when we took up the arcane world of addition and subtraction and division that made my stomach clench in knots and my whole body scrunched down in my desk chair to avoid being called to the chalkboard to have my ignorance revealed to the whole world. It seemed to me that, no matter how carefully adults explained math to me, it all got muddled in my head. Mostly, I felt like I had a hole in my brain some place and all that carefully stored information about math simply drained away. I was also increasingly convinced that my math tests were different from the ones other kids got. I was almost positive that my math problems moved around on the test paper when I looked up to heaven for inspiration and help. Those sneaky numbers slipped away from the problem I thought I was working on and moved over to confound and upset the other problems on the paper. Thus, I became hopelessly confused about these numbers that perambulated around the test and often ended up with no answer at all to my test questions. And I also knew that complaining to the teacher about these pesky numbers that moved on me would get me so sympathy at all. In fact, I was pretty sure that if I complained about this treatment, I would be sent to the principal’s office and my parents would be called in and I would be in really big trouble.

One day, I realized that I sat across the aisle from Mary Ann Fisher, the best math student in the class, maybe in the whole world. She always understood the math lessons, she always got a perfect score on her homework (and always remembered to do her homework), and she almost always got the highest score on the math test. Her only rival was Jimmy Woods but he sat several rows away from me and was no help in my dilemma. I had been watching Mary Ann quietly for several months trying to figure out how she was able to get so many right answers and to finish the tests so quickly. I thought there had to be a clue somewhere that would explain her success and help me figure out why I was so lame at math.

I remember vividly the day I had my great insight. We were taking a math test and my test paper was behaving as it often did – the numbers were slipping around the paper and the more I tried to remember what to do with them, the more hopelessly lost I became. I glanced over to Mary Ann and there she was blithely zipping through the test and almost never using her eraser. And that’s when it came to me. The answers were in her pencil. That was the secret to her success; the answers were in her pencil. Well, no wonder she made it look so easy; no wonder she got such high marks. She had the special pencil. So, I thought, she always finishes her math test way early. I will break the point of my pencil accidentally on purpose, of course, and then innocently ask to borrow her pencil. I

figured that pencil would have enough right answers left so that I could hope to pass the math test. I was not greedy; it was not that I would get a high grade – that would be unbelievable to the whole class, but I might just pass the test. And so that is precisely what I did. She finished; I broke my pencil point, borrowed her pencil, and sat back waiting for the answers to flow out of that special pencil and take me out of my misery.

Well, guess what? I was wrong. The answers I needed were not in the pencil. The answers we desire; the answers we need are never in the pencils. All the fancy equipment in the world, all the gadgets, all the tools, all the high-tech stuff can be helpful, but the answers are not in the equipment or the stuff or the tools; the answers we seek are always within us.

Today we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. We celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit who arrived like fire and wind and changed the apostles forever. Before, they were afraid, they were uncertain, they were unable to act. There they were hiding in their locked room, afraid to speak to anyone outside their small circle about their leader, Jesus. Even though they had seen him do amazing things, even though they had seen him resurrected from the dead, they were still unable to follow his call to share their Good News with the world. They needed something, some sign, to help them find the strength of purpose, the courage, to go out into the world and teach the way of life they had seen Jesus teach and live.

So, were the tongues of flame and rushing wind like that special pencil I thought held all the answers? Well, the apostles had no idea what the Holy Spirit would be. They might have remembered that Jesus had promised help to them, help that would come after he left them. The image we have of the Holy Spirit is only one of many images that we humans have used to describe this wonderful gift of God. We use strong images like fire and wind to help us remember that God's gifts are amazing and powerful. But the image is not the gift; the images we used to describe God's gifts are not the gifts themselves. They are not the pencil.

God's true gifts are already in all of us as they were already in the apostles. That the apostles did not realize their gifts or believe in their gifts does not mean the gifts were not there. Each of us, as children of God, possesses wonderful gifts. They are all different; they are all wonderful, and they are all important. First, we need to figure out what those gifts are and then we need to offer them to the larger world. Sometimes, we know our gifts early on and revel in them. Sometimes, it takes a long time to figure out our gifts. Sometimes, it helps us to have others tell us what they think we are good at. Sometimes, it takes making mistakes to learn what our gifts are and how they work best. It is not easy figuring out our gifts, but when we do, we can act with joy and power and confidence in the world. That which had seemed so hard can become easy and joyful. And sometimes, that awareness comes to us all at once, like a rush of wind or burst of fire. One minute, we struggle and fail; the next minute it comes smoothly and easily and we succeed. We have our "aha" moments; we have our own little "Pentecost moments" throughout our lives.

But we should never forget that these gifts are not in the pencil. These gifts are not outside us; these gifts are not injected into us like special drugs. The gift of the Holy Spirit to the apostles was the realization, the awareness of the gifts they already possessed. That realization gave them the courage to go out into the world and preach the Good News of God in Christ with amazing strength and power and fervor. All the gifts we need to be happy and healthy and whole human beings are already present in our lives. We really don't need tongues of flame or bursts of wind or even special pencils. We have God's enduring love, we have our loved ones, family and friends, and we have this community of faith to help us and guide us to finding and celebrating our gifts.

I still like certain pencils more than others, but I now know that the answers I seek are never in the pencil.