

Pentecost – 04 June 2017  
Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23

Today we are celebrating the Feast of the Pentecost, the day when all of the disciples were granted the powerful gift of the Holy Spirit. From our readings, we hear three clear messages: First, we learn that everyone will be given the gift of the Spirit. We just have to be willing to accept it and then do what God needs us to do with that gift.

Second, not everyone will receive the same gifts or in the same ways. Some will be given the Holy Spirit in obvious and flashy ways, like speaking in tongues or the gift of healing. But most of us will be given gifts that are more subtle and quiet in their nature. We hear very clearly in the reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians that we will all receive differing gifts, but each one of those gifts is necessary. They are unique but at the same time of equal worth or value as every other gift.

The third lesson we learn is that the gift of the Holy Spirit is both necessary for the life of the Christian and part of our Christian mandate. Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." We have all been sent out into the world with the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have to learn how to recognise and use those gifts to the glory of God, and in the furtherance of his Kingdom.

In a second I am going to tell you a story. It's about two things: the importance of the Holy Spirit in our lives and the ways we learn how to deal with the Holy Spirit. Working with and accepting the Holy Spirit is sort of like learning how to swim if you live on an island. You need to learn how to swim but there are different ways to learn. As you listen to this story, think about how *you* react to the Holy Spirit? Are you ready to just dive in, or do you need to take it one toe at a time? Either way is good, as long as you keep trying.

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there was an island. This island wasn't very large, but it wasn't very small either. It was just the right size for everyone. For those who liked to explore, it was big enough to capture their imagination. For those who preferred to stay close to home, everything they needed was available within a few short miles. There were lots of different people, and lots of different interests. Everybody was unique and encouraged to be their own person.

Through the generations, no one ever left the island for good. Sometimes a few of the younger folks would go to the next island, just to see what life was like over there, but they always came back. They quickly learned that the grass may look greener on the other side, but it didn't feel as good on the feet as the green, green grass of home. So, soon after their foray into the 'real' world, they would come toddling back, ready to embrace the life they had been raised for all along.

One of the ways that this island community was so unique was that it prepared its people for the realities of life. The children were taught by their parents to carry on with a vocation. The adults were schooled in the community by the elders in the ways of maturity and wisdom. There were a few unwritten rules that were lived by: all of the island dwellers may be different, but they are all of the same worth. No one should be taught something about life that others weren't privy to. Every person had the same rights and responsibilities within the community. And the greatest community rule was this: *everyone will learn how to swim and respect the water.*

This last rule may seem a little harsh to us outsiders, but for the island-dwellers it just made good sense. Every family on the island had something to do with the water. Some people were fishermen and worked in boats *on* the water. Others were geologists and spent a lot of time *under* the water. Some people were artists who painted *pictures* of the water. And still others made their living on the *docks*, working for the tourists.

Since before anyone could remember, the elders of the community had been teaching water skills to the children from the moment they could walk: how to swim, how to fish, how to react in a storm or when you're on the water with fierce waves. The elders taught the children many things, but the greatest lesson they taught them was to not fear the water, but respect it and love it. The elders knew both how dangerous the water could be if it was taken for granted *and* what a life-giving gift the water could be when it was treated with awe and reverence.

For many years the island grew in population because they never closed their docks to anyone. All who wished to join them could, they just had to live by the community rules, and above all else, learn how to swim.

One beautiful summer day, the ferry came floating toward the dock as the sun glistened on the waves and the seagulls danced to a song of welcome. There were two new families coming to live on the island. The name of one family was Hope, and the name of the other was Fear. The children in the Hope family could barely wait for the boat to dock before they disembarked and began exploring the many dockside stores and the rocks where other children were hunting for crayfish and anemones.

The whole Fear family came slowly off the boat to tentatively place their seasick feet upon steady land. Their lifejackets tied tightly around them, they refused to give them back to the captain of the boat when they realised that lifejackets could not be found in any of the stores on this strange island. Indeed, they were quite perturbed when their request for life preservers, flares and other emergency aids was met with loud guffaws and slaps on the back. The island-dwellers couldn't understand why this new Fear family was so insistent that they have safety devices. After all, once you learn how to swim and how to read the water, you know when it's safe to go out and when you shouldn't.

In only a few short minutes it became very clear to the elders of the island that the Hope family would fit in just fine. As a matter of fact, the whole family had just signed up for swimming lessons already. On the other hand, the Fear family was quite another story. They had quickly gone to the hotel, closed the blinds and called down to the front desk for Gravol. Apparently, they were still a little queasy from the ferry ride.

As the days turned into months, and the months faded into years, both the Hope and Fear families integrated into the island dwellers society. Sure, there were still some noticeable differences. The Hope family brought a lot more laughter and adventures to their neighbourhood. Everywhere the Hope children went, chaos and challenges would follow, but always-new growth and understanding would be close behind. On the other side of the island, the Fear family had slowly begun to be a challenge themselves for their neighbours. They refused to go near the water, only going to the island's main dock when need of supplies became mandatory. Their own dock fell into disrepair because it was never used. The community members tried hard to include them in group events and holiday plans but it was harder and harder to do because all the big stuff revolved around the water. Soon the Fear family became a reclusive bunch who lived 'over there' and were left on their own as much as possible.

One day after school, the most irrepressible of the Hope family children marched up to a timid and shy Fear family child and invited him to come over to play. The Fear child was so lonely that he said yes to the invitation before he had a chance to remember that he was afraid. And so, began an unlikely but wonderful friendship between a child born of hope and one born in fear.

As the days got longer and the children played outside later into the evening, the Hope family began planning their annual 'first spring picnic on the beach event'. By this time the Fear

child had become quite fast friends with the child of Hope and his friendship helped him to overlook the fact that he was scared of the water. When the time came for the picnic, the Fear child put up quite an argument when his parents tried to make him stay home "just in case". Much to their amazement, their son was willing to forgo his fear in the pursuit of the fun that his friend Hope was having.

On the specified bright, warm and sunny Saturday afternoon, the Hope child showed up at the door of the Fear household with an invitation from his family *and* the elders of the island dwellers. Seeing the formality of the invitation, the Fear family, afraid of being rude, agreed to come along to the beach picnic, with one stipulation: they had to be able to bring their lifejackets.

Before the Hope child arrived with the whole Fear family in tow, the elders of the community addressed the people who had gathered on the beach. The chief elder stood on a raft out in the water and said this: "The Fear family has been with us for several years now and none of us have been able to get to know them well at all. We have not treated them as unique and yet of equal value. We have avoided them for fear that *their* fear would infect us. Today we must change that. They are just like you and me. The only difference is that they are scared of the water. We know how foolish that fear is, but it is not foolish for them. Today, we must add another rule to our community by-laws. That rule shall be this: when we meet with those who have fear, we will not overwhelm them with our fearlessness. We will walk beside them until their fears recede and hope has grown in its place."

As the elder was finishing his speech, the crowd could hear the gentle sounds of laughter coming through the trees. The Hope family boy was walking along with the whole Fear family and they were smiling. The people gathered on the beach couldn't believe their eyes.

Mr. and Mrs. Fear tentatively approached the elders and the Hope Family down by the edge of the water. Mr. Fear then told them all about what the little Hope boy had taught them on their journey down to the beach. Mr. Fear began to speak and as he spoke his voice grew stronger, his breathing levelled out and he even began to relax.

"This young man of Hope," started Mr. Fear, "came to get us with your invitation. We came because we were scared of offending you but as we walked here, he told us his story of coming to this island. It seems that when he came here he was scared too because he didn't know how to swim. But his hope overcame his fear when the elders assured him that learning to swim takes time for some. When he was scared to go into the water, one of the other boys took his hand and told him just to put his toe in first. He wouldn't have to go in head first. He could take the journey into the water one step at a time."

"My family came to this island with a little bit of hope that we could make a new start, but our fear quickly eroded away what little bit of hope we had in the first place. Today, a little person with hope has reminded us that our fear is a decision we make, just as is our hope. So, with your help, we would like to leave some of our fear behind, and learn how to put our toes in the water with the hope that someday we'll learn how to swim."

As Mr. Fear stopped speaking and started shaking from the effort it took for him to speak to all of those people, a great cheer rose up. When the elders and Mr. Fear looked toward the water's edge they could see a little boy named Hope holding the hand of a little boy named Fear as they each pointed one brave big toe out into the approaching waves.

All these years later, there is a big rock on a beach on that island with an inscription: Fear may have gone into the water, but hope arose from the sea. And to this day there are no families named Fear but there is a great clan who have come to be known as the Family of New Life.