

“Inspire Us, O Lord!”

Let us pray: Inspire us O lord and create a right Spirit within us. Amen.

- I. Introduction: Today is Pentecost. Just as Jesus promised in our Gospel reading for today, the Holy Spirit came to protect and guide his followers. The Spirit came in the form of the wind, the fire, and the ability to speak in languages that those present did not already know. On the first Pentecost the Christian Church was born, and consequently today we celebrate the birthday of the church. Pentecost was an absolutely essential day in the church's formation. Jesus had already given his followers the charge of the Great Commission – “Go ye into all the world and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” At Pentecost the disciples were empowered to carry out this Great Commission and thus they were inspired to take action. The Spirit inspired Jesus' followers in the first century in Jerusalem and the Spirit continues to offer the same inspiration to Christians in 2009. Today I invite all of us to consider what it really means to be inspired by the Holy Spirit at Ascension.

- II. This is my third Pentecost with you, celebrating the birthday of the church together. As many of you remember, Peg and I first joined you in March 2007. I had come to Ascension as The Priest-in-Charge with the understanding that the parish would, over a two-year period, conduct a self-study process, produce a written profile of Ascension, and then, in a series of steps we would decide whether I would become your Rector. It was a time for reflection and discernment about our mutual call. The process culminated two months ago in my installation as your 7th Rector in a beautiful, celebratory service. The desired ending had taken place, and to quote the Brothers Grimm “all lived happily ever after.”

Once our mutual call to minister together was clear and acted upon, what more could one aspire to have in a happy ending? Of course the answer is a new beginning and a season of productive ministry together. Our Christian tradition is infused with the notion of new ministries being built on, new life, new energy, and spiritual empowerment. This takes us right back again to the question: “What does it really mean to be

inspired by the Holy Spirit at Ascension?” I have in front of me a copy of our Parish Profile titled “Fulfilling Our Mission.” It is a very well done document, and I commend it to you. Copies are available in the reception area. On the page that begins “The Choice of New Rector” I read the following: “The Church of the Ascension desires a rector who can join us in fulfilling our mission. We wish to maintain an atmosphere of hospitality, friendship, and caring; at the same time we look to be challenged to do better in all areas of our Christian lives . . . The trait most desired in a new rector, as reflected by the [parish] survey is inspirational leadership: the ability to inspire others, provide strong leadership, and set a clear vision for the parish . . . the parish seeks an inspirational leader who can transform both the life of the parish and individual lives.”

- III. Here we are together, you and I, with a fairly clear mandate about our relationship. I am to inspire and you are to be the inspired! The word inspire comes from the Latin *inspirare*, which means “to breathe into.” It is first of all tied to the idea of being guided or aroused by divine influence. An additional meaning is to stimulate to action and to draw out. As I reflect upon the parish’s desire to be inspired, it is clear to me that a rector cannot breathe spiritual life into a congregation. Only the Holy Spirit can inspire us in this way and can transform both the life of the parish and individual lives. Therefore, in order for me to fulfill this mandate, you and I must both be open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and to being guided and stimulated to action by that same Spirit.

In thinking about life in a congregation, I find several ideas from systems theory to be helpful. Systems theory provides a way of thinking about organizational development and health. All living systems are either in entropy or negentropy. Fancy words, basic meaning – all systems, including parishes, are either growing or declining. Therefore, even though an organization may appear to be standing still, in actuality it is either growing and developing or it is declining. This next part is critical. In a parish, it is the Holy Spirit that can breathe life into the community and inspire it to new more energetic movement toward its mission. There are certain key areas in which the presence of the Holy Spirit is most apparent. These provide us with a way of looking at our own challenges at Ascension. I will be concentrating on each of these areas in subsequent sermons.

Stewardship: There is no sense in leaving the easiest one for last. We have seen the presence of the Spirit in our two most recent stewardship campaigns. Our parish has experienced an increase in the number of pledges as well as an increase in the overall

amount pledged. And yet, as an organization we continue to need to borrow funds on many months to meet expenses and are paying down our building debt at a very slow pace. I believe if we are more intentional about applying Biblical principles in our personal giving and use of parish resources, God will help us rely less upon borrowing and pay own our building debt more quickly.

Sharing Our Faith: We are gifted with one of the most beautiful worship spaces in Knoxville, and we are blessed with a wonderfully rich liturgy. Our music is to the positive side of outstanding. I have come to know you as a deeply loving and interesting community – people who are searching for a place to worship and to grow spiritually would and do love our parish. However, our parish survey confirmed that sharing our faith is a cutting edge for us. We need to rely more fully on the direction of the Spirit as we share our faith and invite others to join us.

Spiritual Growth. The disciples were unable to carry out the Great Commission without growing spiritually. As outlined in the Baptismal Covenant, we are to “continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.” We each need to rely more fully on the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit as we work to carry out this promise. Each year we should know more about our faith than we did a year ago. This will only come from shared study, prayer, and worship.

Living Out Our Ministries. Each one of should have at least one ministry in which we are participating. Some start small, perhaps as an assistant to an assistant in Vacation Bible School, and God will use whatever we bring. The key is that we are intentionally discerning our spiritual gifts and using them in ministry.

Showing Christian Love To One Another. Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves and gives a broad definition of who our neighbors are. Our friends and family members on the Bolivian mission team are carrying out that mandate. A parish enlivened by the Holy Spirit shows a deep degree of concern for one another, for those who come to us, and to those whom we feel called to reach out to. The Spirit inspires us to greater compassion.

Ascension I believe is at a choice point – to move forward inspired by the Holy Spirit in multiple areas or to relax and stay on hold. However, being on hold will not really work. If we move forward, the Spirit will inspire us and guide our actions; if we try to stay on hold we will be on our own. We have gone on record in our Parish Profile as

wishing to be inspired and enlivened. That is exactly what the Holy Spirit can do for us. The rest is up to us. We must remain open to acting upon the Spirit's movement within us and taking hold of the opportunity we have been given at this time in Ascension's life.