



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The Holy Spirit and Her Mess

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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While living in Paris, the French of my school and college years had a chance to bloom and bear fruit. There are some countries in which you are nearly deified if you even attempt to speak the language; France is not one of them. Folks in the country are generally gentle with you but it's never in doubt when you've made a mistake. My French became a community project for the little village of Beaubery in the countryside of Burgundy. They decided that I could no longer my turn to my resident walking dictionary and that I would just have make it on my own. I accepted their challenge and dove in to the fray when our dinner host put a lovely cherry pie on the table proclaiming that he had picked the fruit himself. Without thinking, I started to ask if he had also pitted them himself. Of course, I had no idea what "pit" was in French. Without pause, I asked him if he had pulled the little stones out. As if by magic, everyone in town, all 700 of them, knew instantly. I couldn't buy bread without being assured that there were no little stones in my baguette. Always with the kind of indulgent smile reserved for children. It was a bonding experience.

In Paris, they generally just ignore your attempts and answer you in perfect English. Appropriately put in your place, you mutter, "thank you" knowing full well that even your "merci" would be greeted with a "you're welcome." In their defense, sometimes French spoken by Americans can be painful and why would you want to do that to such a beautiful language.

In learning another language, there is the possibility for spiritual alchemy - two strangers, standing there not comprehending a word, can be recreated as neighbors who are able to hear the other and relate. I'm working on my Creole so that I will be able to be as present as possible in Haiti this fall. A common language breaks down barriers. To me it is a matter of respect to do all I can to be able to communicate and meet the people where they are. It's a Holy Spirit thing for she will work in the attempt to understand and be understood.

The Nicene Creed tells us that the Holy Spirit emerges from the relationship between God and the Son. The Spirit is the verb part of God, always acting and creating. While Jesus was with his friends, he anticipated their anxiety at being without him. He promised the arrival of the Comforter. It must have sounded great to them. He's not going to leave us on our own. We won't have to go it alone! And then it came and opened up their hearts and minds in a new way. Their excitement made people think they were drunk. I think the gift of the Holy Spirit falls into the category of, "be careful what you wish for."

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First off, the Holy Spirit is not interested in the status quo. When she blows into town, things change. Once her fire has landed on you, you think twice about calling her a comforter. She becomes a spiritual personal trainer, pushing you to do things you never expected to do, more than you ever thought you could. As a result you will come face to face with your own fears and demons. If you've always enjoyed a low profile, she may send you out, front and center with something important to say or do. If you've been afraid, suddenly you will discover courage to step out. The effect of the Holy Spirit on the disciples was immediate. They never hid in the upper room again. They began to challenge authority; they shook people up.

It is often said of the Trinity that it reflects the relational nature of God. Relationship is inherent in the Divine. According to Genesis, relationship is what makes us fully human; it's also the messy part of life. It's messy when we have to figure things out according to the nature of our many relationships. How do we keep track of them and keep them all fair. How are we faithful and true to them when life and priorities changes. It's messy taking other people's feelings into account. It's even messier taking other people's opinions into account in a way that preserves relationship rather than dismisses it.

Our journey in faith, individually and collectively, is a study in messy contrasts. We learn one way of thinking about God as children, have to struggle to let that grow and become less certain as we become adults. We like our Jesus gentle and kind but he also brings us face to face with violence and fear and finds us when we want to hide from the meanness of the world. We can have simultaneous moments of joy and discomfort. That is as it meant to be - messy. Through it all, we are invited to keep our ears open to the voice of others, trying to understand and be in right relationship with God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit as we interact with others. How can that be anything but messy?

As citizens of Egypt have voted in their first free elections, their first foray into democracy, they have been asking each other, if your candidate doesn't win, what will you do? Will you seek to overthrow or will you cooperate? I heard one woman proudly proclaim, "If that happens, I will be the loyal opposition." I haven't heard that kind of language around our elections for a while and it was good to hear. She was managing the messiness of relationships in a democracy and it was beautiful. They suddenly have a voice and a choice and are coming to know democratic relationships. I think that we can count on the fact that it will be messy. But that is the nature of the Holy Spirit - she is not just one thing - she is comforter and disturber at the same time, not an either/or experience, but both/and.

Young parents often face the messiness of relationships when managing two families and holidays. Whose family traditions get the top spot? Who is going to be upset? Does it all become so heated that the holidays are something to be dreaded? The comfort of all of the relationships can be overshadowed by messiness; it's life.

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Being members of the Body of Christ is its own kind of messy. Christ gathers us all and the Holy Spirit challenges us with the relationships that arise from coming through the red door of faith. Baptisms are the moments in which we take a stock of how we are doing with messy relationships. The five questions within the Baptismal Covenant describe how to be part of the Body of Christ. We promise to do things that can only be accomplished with God's help, with the comfort and strength visited upon us by the Holy Spirit. What life informed by those promises will look like for Cindy and Carter is for all of us to determine. One amazing thing here is that baptism creates relationships that we don't even know we have. We will promise things to Carter in his chubby cuteness this morning, but within a month, he'll be living in Cleveland. Because of the nature of relationships within the Body of Christ, we can have confidence that others will pick up those promises and be there as Christopher and Melanie find a new church home. The promises remain. Cindy will help us all define what her life in Christ and God's mission will look like. We are now changed because something new is being added to us. We have to adjust, make room and be willing to accept the gifts that Cindy brings just as some lucky church in Cleveland will be changed by the arrival of the Starks family. The messiness will come as we decide how gracefully we are willing to be changed.

Please don't try to avoid the messiness of life and faith. If you have managed to organize your life so there is no mess, enjoying the comfort of how you like things, you might just be wearing blinders or ear plugs. You might be avoiding relationships with those who need you. A comfortable life is unfortunately a target for the Holy Spirit; she might just visit you and set you on fire, open your ears to the sound of work that needs to be done in the world. She may just come and offer you new life with all of its marvelous mess. But if you accept her invitation, she will be the abiding presence to strengthen and comfort you all the way. Come Holy Spirit, come!

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