

PENTECOST, 2015

If you had to name places in this country that might be called especially dangerous to life, I'm pretty sure that the Southern Plains would rank high on the list. These very days there is monumental flooding in parts of Oklahoma and northern Texas, while just a few weeks ago there was an outbreak of those ferocious storms that have led that area to be known by the ominous name "Tornado Alley." Survivors of such storms regularly comment that the approaching twister sounded just like a freight train coming right at them, filling them with fear. We might well imagine that what we heard in our reading about the first Christian Pentecost—that "there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind [that] filled the entire house in which [the disciples] were"—at first brought fear into their own hearts. But the fear was quickly transformed into courage when, as St. Luke writes, they were all "filled with the Holy Spirit" and began boldly proclaiming the Gospel to the people of all different nationalities who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate what was, after all, originally a Jewish feast, occurring fifty days after Passover: the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost. That powerful wind, one of the most common signs of divine power from the very beginning of the book of Genesis, when it swept over the waters at creation, manifested itself that day in Jerusalem by the disciples speaking of what Luke calls "the mighty acts of God." From there, the Twelve spread out through the entire Mediterranean region and perhaps even as far as India and Spain, and were soon to have their ministry joined by others, above all by St. Paul. It is his teaching about the Spirit that I want to emphasize this morning.

The passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians that we heard as our second reading is a powerful contrast between two diametrically opposed ways of life, which he designates as Spirit and flesh. The latter does not refer literally to the flesh that encloses our bones but rather to unredeemed life, self-centered life, life that not only goes against God's will but also causes all sorts of division in society, for these "works of the flesh" include such things as hatreds, rivalry,

jealousy, outbursts of fury, dissensions, and factions. All such behavior weakens not only the body of Christ that is the Church but also our life in civil society. Over against such behavior—and Paul lists a total of fifteen of these “works of the flesh”—there is a list of nine that build up rather than tear down, that unify rather than separate. Interestingly, Paul does not call them “works of the Spirit” (in contrast to “works of the flesh”) and does not even use the plural of the word “fruit,” for all nine are mutually supporting aspects of the one “fruit of the Spirit.” If you are ever intent on memorizing any part of Scripture, I really think these verses would be a good place to start, for Paul’s list is a marvelous summary of what should characterize the life of each one of us: love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (My wording there slightly diverges in a couple places from the translation in our Lectionary, but Scripture scholars point out that a number of Paul’s Greek terms are open to several closely related meanings.) I’d like to say a bit about each, not in the exact order that we have in Paul, and often illustrated by the life and actions of a particular person.

First, then, joy. When I was a novice here some years ago, I found on the top floor of the monastery a holy card that had on it a phrase attributed to the French writer Leon Bloy: “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.” This should not sound surprising. After all, this is what Jesus promised to his followers when he said to the disciples at the Last Supper: “I have told you [all] this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete” (Jn 15:11). What is joy but, as one dictionary definition puts it, “the emotion evoked by well-being or success”? Now there are all sorts of ways in which a person may succeed in something, but surely the most important is what we see already in the early Christians. Here’s the way one historian of religions describes what happened in the early Church: “The people who first heard Jesus’ disciples proclaiming the Good News were as impressed by what they saw as by what they

heard. They saw lives that had been transformed—men and women who were ordinary in every way except for the fact that they seemed to have found the secret of living. They evinced a tranquility, simplicity, and cheerfulness that their hearers had nowhere else encountered. Here were people who seemed to be making a success of the enterprise everyone would like to succeed in—that of life itself.”¹

Such joy will mark our lives as well to the extent that we live according to the model that Jesus gave us, and the same is true of what comes next in Paul’s list: peace. With that term Paul surely included peace in society at large, but in the first place he probably meant a sense of quiet, firm tranquility no matter what trials an individual person may face. A wonderful example from our own era is illustrated by something that happened in El Salvador yesterday, when hundreds of thousands of people were present at the beatification of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was murdered while offering Mass in March, 1980 because of the powerful way he had been preaching against the government-sponsored oppression suffered by so many Salvadorans. He had already received many death threats and so was well aware of how he might die, but he was utterly at peace with that prospect. Just two weeks before his assassination, he said in an interview: “I have often been threatened with death. I must tell you, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If I am killed, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people. I say so without boasting, with the greatest humility.... Martyrdom is a grace of God that I do not believe I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, let my blood be a seed of freedom and the sign that hope will soon be reality.... A bishop will die, but God’s church, which is the people, will never perish.”² It would be hard to find a better example of genuine Christian peace in the face of what was in itself a terrible threat.

Paul next lists patient endurance. We so often want quick results from whatever we try to do, but the old adage that “haste makes waste” is in fact apparent from the experience of any of us. Pope Francis dealt with this problem very frankly in his first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelium Gaudii*.³ Familiar as he is with contemporary life, Pope Francis wrote that “in the prevailing culture, priority is given to the outward, the immediate, the visible, the quick, the superficial and the provisional” (§62). Because of this mindset, he lamented that “it has become very difficult today to find trained parish catechists willing to persevere in their work for some years” (§81), while some priests and other ministers fall prey to a tense and burdensome fatigue because, he said, “they lack the patience to allow processes to mature; they want everything to fall from heaven.... They are unable to wait; they want to dominate the rhythm of life. Today’s obsession with immediate results makes it hard for [people] to tolerate anything that smacks of disagreement, possible failure, criticism, the cross” (§82). There is so much wisdom there. May we all take it to heart.

Paul’s fifth sign of the fruit of the Holy Spirit is kindness. Here he was almost certainly thinking of the kindness we should show to one another, but I’d like to extend this a bit by recounting something I once heard from a Zen Buddhist priest. He said there was a hermit who lived not far from the Japanese city of Kobe. Shortly after the end of World War II, a university student was staying for a time at that hermitage in order to pursue his studies in a peaceful atmosphere. One day, the student was picking up frogs in the small pond near the hermitage and placing them in a covered pail when the hermit monk happened by and asked what he was doing. The young man answered, “Well, these frogs are so noisy that they disturb my study, so I am going to put them on the other side of the mountain.” The monk replied, “Well, be sure not to forget that you will be staying here for only a few years. This is the frogs’ home for their whole

life.” We often may not think much of the importance of kindness to animals, but great saints like Francis of Assisi were well aware of our kinship with all creation and readily addressed animals by such terms as Brother Wolf and Sister Dove. Such kinship has become all the clearer in our own time because we know we share so much DNA with other living things. A great mystic once summed up his entire life’s teaching, which included many beautiful treatises, with the single phrase: “Be kind. Be kind.” This, too, should mark our lives.

After kindness Paul wrote a Greek word that is sometimes translated as “generosity,” as in our Lectionary, but literally the word simply means “goodness,” and I really think that would be the better translation. I say that mainly because if we tried to sum up in one word what it was that Jesus himself did throughout his life on earth, we could not do better than what St. Peter said in his speech to the Roman centurion Cornelius and his whole household, as recounted in the tenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. In St. Luke’s words, Peter told them “what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts. 10:37-38). This, indeed, is what led the early Christians to recognize Jesus’ divinity, which is, after all, not self-evident. As one scholar put it, “They found themselves thinking that if divine goodness were [ever] to manifest itself in human form, this is how it would behave.”⁴ May something of such basic goodness be manifest in our own lives as well.

Next in Paul’s list is a word that could be translated as either “faith” or “faithfulness.” The latter is what our Lectionary has, and this time I agree with the translation. If you reflect on the point, we humans are the only creatures on earth who can make promises and so be faced with the choice of whether or not to be faithful to them. I was recently reading something by a

former abbot of our English Benedictine Congregation. He wrote: “We must always be on pilgrimage, on the move. So many monks, so many married people, get bogged down, bored with themselves and with life. They no longer feel the same about themselves (their vocation, their marriage, their job, their community) as they did in their twenties, and this can be unsettling. [The abbot then wrote:] A junior monk [that is, one in temporary vows] said to me the other day, ‘If I take solemn vows, how do I know that in ten years’ time I won’t be bored, or find that I have grown into someone so different to what I am now that I will go off and get married?’ The short answer is: No one knows. And this is what a vocation should be: a journey into the unknown, with God.”⁵ To be faithful to our promises through thick and thin, trusting in the help of God and of our family and friends, is one of the glories of Christian life. We don’t have to *know* everything in advance because this impossible anyway, but we can always *trust* that what Paul calls “faithfulness” is indeed possible.

Gentleness, named next, may conjure up rather saccharine images of Jesus as a rather weak and spineless person, but in fact it takes great strength to be gentle toward those over whom one has great authority. St. Benedict in his Rule is very insistent, for example, that the abbot of a monastery, like Jacob in the Old Testament, never drive his flock too hard: always giving the strong something to strive for, but never to the extent of driving the weaker away, feeling that they do not have the strength or ability to persevere. That sensitivity to the abilities of others is crucial in any group, whether it be a nuclear family, a religious community, or a whole society.

Last in Paul’s list is self-control. The importance of this has been pointed out not only by religious writers but by perceptive psychologists and psychiatrists as well. That well-known book by Dr. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, has some wonderful lines about the importance

of delayed gratification, the ability to avoid giving in to all of our whims and desires, the ability to keep our eyes on what matters most in the long run. There is nothing sadder than to see people who lack this trait, who want everything to go their way and go that way right now. May the Holy Spirit enable us to have a proper control on all our desires, ordering all the others to the one thing necessary. As St. Augustine wrote in one of the best-known lines from his *Confessions*: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” For those going off to college next year, this point is crucial. You will certainly have some classmates who don’t understand this, who think that freedom can be found in such things as binge drinking and lascivious behavior. Don’t be taken in by such sham. Be true to what is best in you. Be your own man, not a follower of a wayward crowd.

You may have noticed that I have not yet said anything about the very first sign of the Spirit’s fruit: love. But one must always save the best, the most important, till last. Paul was so on target elsewhere when he wrote that love is the fulfillment of the law, just as Jesus said that his one new commandment is “Love one another as I have loved you.” This led great saints like Thérèse of Lisieux to be especially loving and compassionate toward persons in her religious community who were, humanly speaking, very uncongenial and unattractive, but she took Jesus’ words seriously and carried them out in the power of the Holy Spirit. The best theologians have always spoken of the Spirit as the bond of love between Father and Son, but the Holy Spirit is also the bond that unites us to one another. May our lives bear the Spirit’s good fruit whose seed was planted in us at the very time of our baptism.

1 Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 331.

2" Oscar Romero, quoted in *Modern Spiritual Masters*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 74-75.

3" Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, in *Origins* 43, no. 27 (Dec. 5, 2013). This issue of *Origins* contained the first half of this Apostolic Exhortation.

4" Smith, 324.

5 Dominic Gaisford, "Cast Your Bread on the Waters," in *A Touch of God*, ed. Maria Boulding (Still River, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1982), 175.