

The Day of Pentecost C 2025

June 8, 1025

John 14:8-17, 25-27; Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; and Romans 8:14-17

(Sermon by the Reverend Michelle Manicke)

“Do not quench the Spirit....” The apostle Paul gave this word of instruction to the fledgling church at Thessalonica around the year 50 CE. It’s worth noting that this is one of the very first directives to Christ’s church; indeed, many biblical scholars believe that 1 Thessalonians may well be the earliest piece of Scripture to be incorporated into the New Testament.

“Do not quench the Spirit...” Those words jumped off the page at me yesterday, as I was reading the very last scholarly article published on May 14th by the influential Old Testament professor and Bible interpreter Dr. Walter Brueggemann. Sadly, Dr. Brueggemann died this past Thursday, June 5th, at the mature age of 92. Some of you may remember hearing me say that Dr. Brueggemann is one of my favorite theologians. I’m so grateful that he’s left behind a rich legacy of insightful and inspirational teachings that will continue to guide the church in the 21st century. For example, a number of years ago, I had a “lightbulb moment” while reading a piece in which Dr. Brueggemann made a statement to this effect: “The only constant in life is change.” He went on to say that for people of faith this paradoxical state of affairs is okay because we trust that our God, who holds all things, is the God of change. In fact, the constancy of change is a recurring theme of Dr. Brueggemann’s writings precisely because it’s a recurring theme in Scripture itself. The faith stories of our ancestors and our own experience teach us that this earthly life is a constant process of transition, characterized by orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. Those of us who lived through the COVID pandemic are acutely aware of this! [Amen?...] And yet through all the changes and challenges of life, we, the people of God, are called to trust in the One who says, “Behold, I am doing a new thing; do you not perceive it?”¹ and “Behold, I am making all things new.”² From that day long ago, when God called Abraham and Sarah to go to an unknown place God would show them, on up to our day, the Spirit has called and continues to call God’s people to listen, trust, obey, and lean into God’s promise of new life....

“Do not quench the Spirit....” As if anyone could! And yet we humans keep trying to do precisely that, don’t we?! For example, some congregations try to set limits around the work of the Spirit, setting up human rules and doctrines about who is worthy of being included in the church. Sometimes well-intentioned church members attempt to put the kibosh on the Spirit’s creative work by resisting change. Many of us are good at making excuses to justify why we can’t do something without first taking the time to sit together and prayerfully discern the Holy Spirit’s leading. We’re also good at dragging our feet because we’re afraid we don’t have the resources we need or because deep down we just don’t want to commit to the hard work and self-sacrifice that even good change may require of us. Of course, there are also some of us who just don’t like change. Period. I’m sure you’ve heard the old light bulb joke about Lutherans: How many Lutherans does it take to change a lightbulb? Answer: The question is irrelevant because

¹ Isaiah 43:19.

² Revelation 21:5.

Lutherans don't believe in change!... In the most extreme cases, religious and political leaders who are desperate to preserve their personal power have used and continue to use said power to try to quench the work of the Spirit by force..... Friends, I think we're all aware that this self-centered use of power is ultimately what led to the crucifixion of Jesus. AND you and I, who know the rest of the story, also know that even though human actions can get in the way of God's work of reconciling the world, ultimately, we cannot quench the Spirit. The Resurrection of Jesus the Christ teaches us that God always gets the last Word. Always!

"Do not quench the Spirit...." In case you hadn't noticed, today's Scripture readings also make it abundantly clear that the Holy Spirit is, by definition, unquenchable. In the reading from Acts 2, we heard how the Spirit showed up as a violent, rushing wind, with tongues of fire and a loud cacophony of languages that everyone mysteriously understood. In Psalm 104, we're reminded of the creative nature of God's life-giving Spirit, which has brought all things into being and continually renews the face of the earth. In Romans. Paul proclaims the good news that all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. The Holy Spirit sets us free from fear and "adopts" us as children of God and joint heirs with Christ. Our God doesn't want us to live in fear; on the contrary, God wants to set us free from bondage to fear, so that we can have the fullness of life in the Spirit.

"Do not quench the Spirit...." In an earlier chapter of John's gospel, Jesus teaches that the Spirit will quench us! While conversing with the woman at the well, he likens the Spirit to "living water," which he describes as "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life...."³ So, I can't speak for you, but I have questions! And one of my questions is this: "Since we can't quench the Spirit, what can we do with the Spirit?" The short answer is: We can receive the Spirit as a gift from God. In chapter 20 of John's gospel, the Risen Jesus breathes on his disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit," and he lets them know that the Spirit gives them powerful gifts to proclaim God's message of grace and forgiveness. To sum up: We, who receive the Spirit that brings us into relationship with God, are called to bear witness to that same Spirit, so that others may come to know Christ and the life that is in him.

"Do not quench the Spirit...." In today's reading from John 14, Philip, one of the first disciples, unintentionally tries to quench the Spirit by asking the not-yet-crucified Jesus for proof of what God is up to. Philip urges Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." But Jesus says, "No." He then tells Philip to believe based on his word or, if he can't do that, to believe based on the works of ministry he's seen Jesus do. Jesus then makes an astonishing promise that extends to his disciples of every time and place: Whoever believes in the God he's come to reveal, will do the very same works Jesus does. How is that possible? It's possible because the Spirit will be poured out on us and will remain with us as our Advocate, Guide, and Teacher. If the members of Christ's church are willing to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit, she will give us the wisdom, courage, peace, and strength we need to continue God's loving, liberating, life-giving work in this time and place....

³ Cf. John 4:10 and 14.

“Do not quench the Spirit....” Three weeks before he entered the church triumphant, Dr. Brueggemann was still passionately engaged with God’s world and prayerfully listening to how the Spirit is leading the church to do Christ’s work today. Dr. Brueggemann’s last published article concludes with words of hope for congregations that do not try to quench the Spirit. He writes:

The propensity of established communities of faith is to curb any such empowerment of the Spirit according to our habit of “decently and in good order.” But since the church among us in our society is now mostly disestablished, there may indeed be room and opportunity for fresh engagement with the Spirit who summons us in hope beyond our present assumptions.⁴

I want you to notice that where many Christians are fearful because church attendance is declining and churches are closing, Dr. Brueggemann expresses hope that the demise of some congregations is creating opportunity for the church, the Body of Christ, to be embodied in new ways for a new generation. When you stop and think about it, this makes sense because we are, after all, people of the resurrection!... As I’ve pondered Dr. Brueggemann’s words, I can’t help thinking about Martin Luther and his fellow reformers in the 16th century, who declared that the church is “semper reformanda”—that is, the church is always being reformed through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Two thousand years after Jesus walked this earth, God is still “doing a new thing, do you not perceive it?”⁵ Indeed, our God is still at work, “making all things new.”⁶

My friends, let us not quench the Spirit.... Instead, may each of us open our hearts and allow the Spirit to quench our thirst for God. That is my hope and my prayer for all of us this summer, as we engage in our respective experiences of learning and renewal. While none of us can predict exactly how this grand experiment will go, we can rest securely in Jesus’ promise that the Spirit will be with us. May we as individuals and as a congregation be receptive to Jesus’ promised blessing of the “spring of water gushing up to eternal life,” bringing forth new growth and fruits in our lives. I’m so grateful for this opportunity to explore the leading of the Spirit in Scotland this summer, and while I will miss you all, I’m already looking forward to the time when we come back together in August to share our experiences and discern how the Spirit is leading us to bless others in this beautiful, yet oh-so-broken world God loves so deeply. As 95-year-old Sylvia said to me on Friday afternoon, “I hope you have a wonderful time this summer, and I’ll see you in two months!”

⁴ Brueggemann, Walter.

⁵ Isaiah 43:19.

⁶ Revelation 21:5.