

NINE O’CLOCK IN THE MORNING

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Grace Church in New York
The Day of Pentecost + June 12, 2011

And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:22-23)

One of the marks of a great novelist is the ability to create vivid, even exaggerated characters who are impossible to forget. Miss Havisham, who appears throughout Charles Dickens’ novel, *Great Expectations*, is a woman with a serious incapacity to forgive. In fact, she makes the retention of sin the mission of her life. The story goes that many years ago, at twenty-minutes to nine on the morning of her wedding, Miss Havisham was one shoe shy of being dressed and ready. In the dining hall of the house a great cake and feast awaited the guests. The bride’s maids were ready to put on their gowns, and the household staff were making last-minute preparations.

At twenty-minutes to nine, however, Miss Havisham’s hopes and dreams came to an abrupt end. Just then a cruel note arrived from the groom, informing the would-be bride that the wedding was not to be. At that moment Miss Havisham stopped her life. She stopped all the clocks at twenty-minutes to nine. She pulled the drapes over every window to block off all sunlight. She vowed to spend the rest of her life sitting in her wedding gown – minus one shoe – among the rotting wedding cake and yellowing decorations of a day that almost was. Years later in the story she arranges for the adoption of an orphan girl whom she names Estella. But even Estella is merely a means to the end of Miss Havisham’s bitterness. Miss Havisham’s goal is to raise Estella to be a ruthless heart breaker, who will crush the spirit of any man who falls for her.

Miss Havisham’s chosen way of being turns her into a living corpse. After a young boy named Pip is brought in to meet her, he reflects on the encounter: *Once I had been taken to see some ghastly waxwork at the Fair, representing I know not what impossible personage lying in state. Once I had been taken... to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress, that had been dug out of a vault under the church pavement. Now, waxwork and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me. I should have cried out, if I could.* Miss Havisham is unforgettable in her ability to nurse a grudge. And hats off to Charles Dickens for creating the poster girl for the words of Jesus we heard today: *if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*

Today is the Day of Pentecost. Today we celebrate God’s gift of the Holy Spirit. In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles we heard the account of what happened on this day. It had been ten days since the risen Jesus had departed from the company of his disciples. They were gathered together in Jerusalem with many others from different regions where they spoke different languages. It was nine o’clock in the morning. Suddenly a sound like the rush of a mighty wind filled the house, and they saw visions of divided tongues of fire resting on each of them. Everyone began speaking about the mighty works of God, but those who listened heard the proclamations in their own native language. It was Peter who eventually stood up and declared that God has poured out his Spirit upon them.

Peter would have known it was the Holy Spirit because the Day of Pentecost wasn’t the first time he the disciples had received such a gift. In today’s reading from the Gospel of John we’ve heard how on the evening of the first Easter Day the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples in presumably the same Jerusalem house, and said, *“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent*

me, even so I send you..” And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” So there they were, fifty days before Pentecost, receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit in a different way. The signs of wind and fire would come later; this time it was breath.

But what, you might ask, or more appropriately, *who* is the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is the Lord, the giver of life, as we affirm each week in the Nicene Creed. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ who was present and active at the moment of creation. The Holy Spirit is God’s personality that powers and animates the whole creation. The Holy Spirit is the mystery within you. You lie on your bed on a sleepless night and you sometimes fleetingly grasp in yourself a presence that is more than yourself, distinct from yourself, yet impossible to disentangle from yourself and your history. What is it? *Who* is it? Who is this close companion of your inmost thoughts and ways? Assuming you are not filled with new wine, chances are this is the Holy Spirit. This is the Spirit of God whom Jesus promised to send, who spoke through the prophets, who gave Samson his strength, and Joshua his leadership. This is the Lord, the giver of life, who has entangled and entwined his Spirit with your spirit. This is the Spirit of God in you. Confused? Tune in next week when Ted Pardoe spells it all out on Trinity Sunday!

Sad to say, we all know people who desperately need God’s gift of the Holy Spirit. Hopefully, no one in your life is as bad as Miss Havisham, but it’s no secret that the world is full of hard, unforgiving souls who make an art form out of nursing their grudges. They need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Nine o’clock in the morning can’t come soon enough! It could be that you and I, too, travel through those times of life when it seems to be forever twenty-minutes to nine. The Word of the Lord is rare, any awareness of God’s presence is dim. Joy and wonder are nowhere to be found, and worship has become rote and disconnected from God. Imagine being invited to dinner at a friend’s house. You sit down at the dining room table, but instead of being presented with food, you are handed a cook book. Instead of eating, what you all do is recite recipes – responsively, by whole verse. One group at the end of the table sets a recipe to music, and they sing it in perfect four-part harmony. Someone stands up and speaks for twenty minutes about the joys of eating and the benefits of proper nutrition. You wish he would stop at the 12-minute mark, but he thinks that doing so won’t get you to nine o’clock. “Little sermons make little Christians,” he insists. So you dig yourself in for the long haul. All the while you are starving, and you wonder: will I ever actually eat again?

Well, the whole purpose of the Christian faith, and the church that tries to convey it, is that you taste and see how gracious the Lord is. It is that you know and experience the love of God, through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. It’s not that we seek to conjure up the presence of God by what we do, as if we are cajoling the cook to come out the kitchen with the food. Rather, what we declare and give thanks for is God’s un-resting, un-hasting, immortal, invisible, silent-as-light activity in the world and with your spirit. Through Christ it is always nine o’clock in the morning. The true bridegroom has arrived. Dinner is served, not just on the Day of Pentecost, but before it as we’ve seen in Scripture, and after it, as we’ve witnessed in our own lives. Even today God pours out his Spirit through the waters of Baptism, and in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. We would never be so arrogant as to limit God’s giving of himself to these means alone, but what we do say is that here are two sure and certain avenues of grace. To partake of them is to receive the breath of Christ. It is to receive the Holy Spirit.

According to John, it was in the same room where they had shared the first Eucharist that Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” This harks all the way back to the Book of Genesis (2:7), when *the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.* Here is the picture

of Adam as nothing more than a clay statue before the breath of God, and as a living person after receiving the breath of God. You don't have to believe that Adam was the first biological person. Rather, think of him as the first spiritual person to receive the life and breath of covenant relationship with God. Adam and Eve represent the first to be called into heightened awareness of and intimate fellowship with God.

As we all know, things did not go so well in the Garden of Eden. Neither do things always go well with those whom God breathes his Spirit upon in our day. It's no secret that millions of baptized people lead anything but Spirit-filled lives, and make no attempt to practice their faith. The cause may be discouragement or rebellion or a deep wound. When such times come upon us, the answer is neither to give up nor to try harder. It is neither to drop our hands in defeat nor clench our fists. The answer is to open our hands and to call upon the name of the Lord. It is to repent and return to the Lord, to engage with a community of God's people, and to trust that it is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. It is God's good pleasure to give you the life of his Spirit which is abundant with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and goodness. The Spirit's life is nothing short of the life that God eternally enjoys, and shares with those in heaven. Such an experience of God's life can be ours as well. The Spirit of God fills us.

The Spirit of God also sends us. The Spirit sends us into the world in witness to God's love. "*As the Father has sent me, even so I send you,*" said Jesus. Does God intervene in the world? So asks a skeptical age, often with a sneer. The answer is an emphatic yes. Whether or not God suspends the laws of nature and performs miracles is not the mode of intervention we speak of today. God intervenes in the world by filling people with his Spirit, by entangling his Spirit with our spirits, and by sending us into the world as the body of Christ. The Salvation Army has a magnificent phrase to describe their unique mission in the world: *Combating Natural Disasters with Acts of God*. The phrase rightly locate God's intervention not in earthquake, flood, fire, or plague. Rather, God intervenes by sending forth people filled with the Holy Spirit.

I don't know about you, but I find it more than a little unnerving that when Jesus sent out his disciples, he directly tied the gift of the Holy Spirit with the work of forgiveness. To be filled with the Spirit by no means grants us immunity from the wounds that the world will inflict. Life is hard, love can hurt, and the temptation is always before us to retain the sins of those who do wrong. But the measure of the Spirit in you is the ability to forgive the sins, not retain them; to let go of them, not hold onto them.

I think again of Charles Dickens' character, Miss Havisham, who for twenty-five years retained the sin of the fiancé who jilted her. Dickens tells us that the bridegroom who never showed soon fell into deep shame and ruin, and no one even knew anymore if he were alive or dead. By all accounts he was a pathetic little man, and Miss Havisham was better off without him. But she would not let go, and indeed, even had plans to be laid out in death on the banquet table near the rotted cake. She stopped the clock at twenty minutes to nine, instead of waiting until nine o'clock in the morning. Yes, she's fiction. Yes, she's a caricature. But do you know her?

This is the Day of Pentecost so that it may not be so for us. This is the day Jesus breathes on us and says, "*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*"