

Pentecost 2022

Because the diocesan convention takes place at the end of the week, I have been pressed to find a homily topic earlier than usual.

God did not leave me to stress long.

Monday morning, Lou Machado, who is making improvements on my house, called me on his way over.

He wanted to talk.

By the time he had arrived, he had laid out a discussion of the Holy Spirit that we both agreed was exactly what the world needs right now, and just a few days before Pentecost.

I would like to share it with you.

Because we humans do not have the benefit of knowing the future, we can plan and work diligently on a project, only to have something unforeseen undermine it.

I once planted a large berry garden about ten feet from the edge of a wooded area.

My blackberries and raspberries were not growing.

I later discovered that there was a black walnut in the woods.

They produce juglone, an herbicide that inhibits the growth of certain competitors, especially fruit-bearing ones.

This was a minor event, but, over the course of my life, I have developed an awareness that, the more I try to control things, the more awry I go.

Things worked out much better when I simply followed the path that God opened before me.

I am reminded of how the Soviet government tried to convince their citizens that the poor in the United States suffered much more than they did by showing them “The Grapes of Wrath”—the United States condemned in its own words, as it were.

This backfired, however, because Soviet citizens’ take away from the film was that the Joads fled to California *in a vehicle*.

We need not be stressed about our paths.

Not one of us can succeed by ourselves because we cannot know the future or consider all the possible eventualities.

The woods of life are full of unseen walnut trees, and that is OK.

The Spirit was sent to guide us where God wants us to go.

As Lou pointed out in our conversation, understanding this is freeing as it removes the pressure of having to know everything.

When I was looking for a job that would bring me closer to my parents so that they could move in without too much stress, I saw an opening in the little town of Shallotte.

I had been applying mostly to churches in or near cities—Atlanta, Durham, Charlotte—but something told me to look into it, anyway.

I did, and the stipend St. James was offering was roughly \$33,000 below the mean.

Normally, I would have stopped right there, but something urged me forward, so I stuck with it, even though I did not understand why I felt moved to continue.

When I met the search committee in an online interview, the relationships clicked.

We all decided to move forward, and I came down for an in-person interview, which also went well.

They offered me the job, and I accepted.

Now I get to serve this parish of loving, creative, dedicated people with an energetic vestry and a capable assistant.

There were challenges, of course.

Up until that point, I had lived in rectories.

In fact, my first job even supplied a car.

Now I had to buy a house, the first one ever.

Someone on the search committee introduced me to an exceptional realtor who did not even bat an eye when I gave her my long list of must haves, would really like to haves, and would be nice to haves.

She just said, “Oh, this is helpful!”

I thought, “This woman is crazy. I *like* her.”

I had two days in Brunswick to find a home that would suit my family’s particular needs.

I found one, made an offer, and soon we were closing.

I had no idea at the time what would happen to the housing market in 2020.

As of today, my house has gone up 60% in value.

Had I stayed in rectories and not been forced to enter the housing market when I did, I might have had to retire in a mobile home.

What is more, after I closed on the house, interest rates dived and I refinanced.

Though the house had the best floor plan for sharing it with my parents that I could find in two days, it had been decorated by the design firm of Liberace and Elvis to be a Florida party house.

It was the opposite of everything I like.

I shared this assessment with a kind neighbor who told me about Lou.

He is the guy who called me to talk about the Spirit on his way to work turning my house into the home of a Savannah or Charleston gentleman.

He is not only a man with a great devotion to God, but is also an artist and a craftsman, so now the house is slowly looking less foreign to me, and I made a friend in the process.

The Spirit knew where I needed to be.

I just had to follow its inexplicable nudging.

I feel I must include a caveat to prevent misunderstanding.

This is not the prosperity gospel.

I am not saying that one can pray for a house and get it, but the opposite.

God put me where I needed to be when I did not even realize I needed to be there.

When the Spirit starts to move, it is not necessarily a gentle occurrence.

All of what I described above would not have happened had I not suffered a sudden and unexpected loss of half of my employment in 2017.

Similarly, when the Spirit started to move on the day of Pentecost, it began with a startling event.

The disciples were gathered calmly together as a community, united in devotion to God and to one another, when “from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a

violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.”

That is some scary stuff, but it prepares the way for something beautiful.

They begin to communicate with everyone.

Now they can spread the message to *all* the people of the world.

The gospel, in other words, is for everyone.

God is there for anyone who wants that relationship.

As Joel said and Luke quotes, “*everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

There are, of course, those who will dismiss it all as nonsense, just as they dismissed the apostles as being drunk.

It will take them longer to figure things out, but God will be there when they are ready.

The Spirit not only guides individuals, but also works to move history forward.

Sometimes it is when the world seems the darkest or most threatening that the Spirit is about to move on a grand scale.

These days, churches are shrinking, but I gained a lot of hope from the fact that Lou comes from the Evangelical tradition and I come from the Episcopal tradition, yet we seem to agree on everything significant.

It made be think that, as the churches shrink, they will be reformed and come out the other side with greater unity, with a deeper understanding of how God works and what our purpose here is.

Like the roaring of the wind on Pentecost, change may start with a fearful event, but God never gives up on God's people, and we never lose the need for God.

We just need to listen to the Spirit as it guides us forward, step by step.

As Lou stated when we talked, we all share the same needs, the same fears, the same inability to figure it all out by ourselves.

It is freeing to acknowledge this and let go, freeing not to have all the responsibility.

It is easier to trust God and follow the nudging of the Spirit.

Who knows what God is planning next?