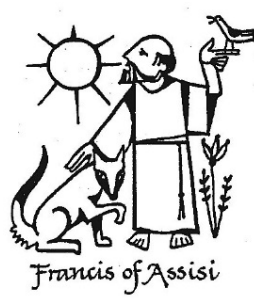


Dear friends in Christ



June 5, 2022, Day of Pentecost

“No Barriers”

The Rev. Dr. John C. Forney, St. Francis Episcopal Mission
Genesis 11:1-9; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; Acts 2:1-21;
John 14:8-17

One of the ads I so like is from a sponsor of the PBS Nightly News. It is from an old alma mater, California State University Long Beach. Filmed at a graduation ceremony, students come processing by a row of huge block letters proclaiming, “Go Beach.” As students exit the ceremony in their black academic gowns and mortarboards, one exuberant young woman does a twirl on one foot as she’s passing the camera. Her face is radiant, all aglow. Her gown broadly swirling with the movement. The motto then flashes across the screen: “NO BARRIERS.” You just have to know that this young lady is off to an expansive future. No barriers, indeed!

Except, you have to study and keep your GPA up. That pesky little detail. For screw-ups, I discovered, that was a major barrier. However, after a couple of years in the Army as a medic, I had finally figured how to overcome that one, final impediment, and finally completed my degree at Cal State LA.

But I still tear up when I see that promo. NO BARRIERS and that wonderful, young woman. So much excitement ahead for her.

That’s the message of Pentecost. With the Spirit busting loose. With quiet reverence. Today we celebrate the birthday of the church.

We Episcopalians have always been chary of too much exuberance in worship. It is not our way.

I remember back in high school my girlfriend Barbara had been asked by her close friend, to attend Glenda's church one Sunday afternoon. As boyfriend and protector, I was conscripted to accompany her. I didn't know much about the Foursquare Church, only that their worship was more enthusiastic than that of the staid Presbyterian church Barbara and I attended.

To say "more enthusiastic" was an understatement. People were standing and murmuring, "Yes Jesus, Yes, Jesus." Some were in the aisles loudly testifying or speaking in tongues.

Was I ever out of my comfort zone! If this was the rush of the Spirit – I'm sorry, but I'll take the alternating Sunday. "When's this over?" I whispered in Barbara's ear.

Mercifully, there was some sort of intermission and it was announced that the main service was over. We quietly slid out the side door.

It has been said that it is through our imagination that the Spirit has the best chance of getting ahold of us. Through a moment of inspiration.

Lately, I've had a couple of hymns that have accompanied me through my days as they weave in and out of various moments.

I'm fond of saying that if you don't have a song in your heart on waking, your day's already in trouble. I believe it.

Brian Doyle in ***A Book of Uncommon Prayer***, writes:

"Because you know and I know that a song can save your life. We know that and we don't say it much, but it's true. When you are dark and despairing a song comes and makes you weep as you think yes yes yes."¹

The "Battle Hymn of the Republic" by Julia Ward Howe bore up the spirits of those in that great struggle to preserve our union and end slavery.

¹ Brian Doyle, *A Book of Uncommon Prayer* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2014, 58.

Work songs kept gandy dancers in sync as they hammered in time to straighten the rails of this nation. Lifted their spirits and helped pass the toil of the day.

Union songs forged bonds of solidarity among those struggling for labor justice.

And when President Obama broke into “Amazing Grace” in his rich baritone at the close of his eulogy for The Rev. Clementa Pinckney, killed in yet another mass shooting at a Charleston church – that hymn alone redeemed the day.

To paraphrase Brian’s closing: If today, if haunted by a song that slid out of the radio, or out of memory, and lit up your heart, we pray in thanks that there are such fraught wild holy moments as this. And so: amen.

These songs bind us together. That is the message of Pentecost. It reunites where the Tower of Babel separated – each speaking a language the other didn’t understand.

Keri L. Day, Princeton professor of Constructive Theology and Ethics, reflects on why, as a young girl, she so loved the telling of the story in the Book of Acts. “‘And they were gathered together in one accord.’ That line communicated what was held as sacred within our community: our togetherness, our unbreakable bond of living with and loving each other. We were in one accord. The joy of community was the gift of the Spirit.”²

“Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia. Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene and visitors from Rome, both Jews and Proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”³

This is the miracle of unity, of understanding.

Now, if your wont is to stand in the aisle and shout, to each their own. But the authentic miracle of Pentecost will lead you from that aisle into the city to include the poor and the dissolute. Into the cancer ward and onto the union picket line. Otherwise, what you thought to be a long-distance call was only a local. As close as your own ego.

² Keri L. Day, “We Need a Pentecost,” *Christian Century*, May 3, 2018.

³ Acts 2:7-11, NRSV.

My dearly departed friend George Regas frequently told the story of a man in an Episcopal Church who, in the middle of the sermon shouted out, "Amen. Amen." Folks looked around to see who was causing the commotion, but soon didn't pay him any further mind. A little while later he stood up and loudly encouraged the priest, shouting, "Preach it, brother. Preach it." At which point an usher stepped beside him, and whispered, urging him to be quiet. After the third outburst, the usher admonished him more sternly that he'd have to restrain himself, to which the man responded that he couldn't help it. He had the Spirit. "Well, you certainly didn't get it here," scolded the usher.

In our own, quiet way, we Episcopalians pray, "Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire, and lighten with celestial fire."

And within the fertile recesses of imagination and of the heart -- yes, even the "Frozen Chosen" are moved to deeds of service and sacrifice.

It was, in fact the Rector of All Saints Church, Pasadena, who went to the assembly point at the Santa Anita Race Track, where Japanese citizens were rounded up to be sent off to far-away concentration camps. This was in 1942, that their priest, Frank Scott, stood in front of trains to protest the removal of Japanese-Americans, American citizens, for God's sake, hauled off to internment camps during World War II.

Not different in kind from what the Nazis were doing in Germany. And all quite legal, to be sure. There was a government order.

This, in a day when proper Episcopal priests from a well-to-do, prominent Pasadena parish did not do such unseemly things. Moved by the Holy Spirit, that's exactly what Fr. Frank did! Moved by the Spirit, he was.

These were all Americans – we are all Americans. No barriers, No separation. We are one in the Spirit. That's what Fr. Frank stood for.

The Spirit in service of unity brings courageous acts of aid on behalf of others. This about the one and true Spirit, not pious bliz-blaz. Or religious hype. Some might call it heroism.

Greater love hath no one than to lay down her life for another. That's what Amerie Jo Garza did in her last moments, calling 911 in an attempt to save her classmates who were still alive as a shooter sprayed her classroom with automatic fire from a high-powered weapon of war. On May 24th just days away from when Amarie anticipated beginning her summer vacation.

“On Tuesday, the Girl Scouts announced that they posthumously awarded her one of its highest honors for risking, and ultimately giving, her life to save others.”⁴

“The organization gave 10-year-old Garza the Bronze Cross, which is awarded ‘for saving or attempting to save life at the risk of the Girl Scout's own life.’”⁵

This “spunky” little girl, so full of life taken from us too soon. And how shall we honor her memory? What is asked of us, the living?

As consciousness slipped and darkness enfolded her, I wonder what song, if any, might have slipped into her fading awareness, what song might have escorted her home to God.

I’m willing to bet that the song which greeted her arrival had to have been “For All the Saints, Who from Their Labors Rest.”

No Barriers, Amerie Jo Garza. No Barriers. Amen.

⁴ Li Cohen, “Girl Scouts Posthumously Award Amarie Jo Garza for Doing ‘All She Could’ to Save Classmates, Teachers During Uvalde Shooting,” *CBS News*, June 1, 2022.

⁵ Ibid.