

The Day of Pentecost – May 24, 2026 – Fr. John Warfel

Ever light a pyramid of charcoal,
only to return 15 minutes later and find that,
despite the initial blaze,
the coals didn't light?

This only seems to happen when you're in a hurry,
It's only when you're surrounded by a bunch of hungry kids,
or irritable adults that the coals don't light the first time
So you try again – you squirt more lighter fluid on the smoldering coals,
a dangerous move: you know better, but you do it anyway.

Then swoosh, big jumping flames.
You jump back.
This time however, when the flames die down,
you watch. You wait. And you start to blow.

Now there's a real art to blowing on coals
you start out slowly – a steady and controlled flow of air-
directed at the emerging white, ashy corners of the charcoal bricks

As you blow, a red glow broadens and stretches out beneath the ash
this red glow expands in direct proportion-
to the the force and flow of your breath
your tightened and rounded lips controlling the force, direction and flow
It's kind of fun, isn't it?

The Feast of Pentecost. When I was a kid we called it WhitSunday.
The great coming of the Holy Spirit
The events we celebrate today are recorded by Luke and John
Notice that the accounts are quite different

They are different, not because one is factual and the other is not
They are different because-
they reflect the different ways women and men experience the Holy Spirit.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke recounts a very dramatic story indeed
Rushing wind, divided tongues of fire
Suddenly the apostles begin to speak in other languages
Meanwhile, this rushing sound draws strangers to the house,
among them some Jews from foreign lands

Yet, they hear their own languages spoken clearly and distinctly,
oddly enough, by a bunch of provincial (and not too terribly bright) Galileans
Generally, this is what comes to mind-
when we meditate on the great Pentecost event
It's loud, dramatic, uncontrollable, and a little frightening,
not unlike what happens when a match touches fluid soaked charcoal

Excitable, volatile, emotionally charged experiences of the Holy Spirit
Pentecostals and Charismatic Christians believe that speaking in tongues
and other spontaneous displays of religious fervor-
are all manifestations of the Holy Spirit
And if a person does not experience these, he or she is not saved.

I guess I'm just too Episcopalian for my own good
I've never spoken in tongues
And spontaneous, public displays of being caught up in the Spirit leave me cold
I don't deny that these are very real experiences for some
But whipping up a frenzy within a congregation is not my idea of worship.

My soul delights in liturgical worship – purposeful, slow, meditative
worship experienced by all five senses,
ritual actions fine-tuned by the passing of two-thousand years
Perhaps that's why I relate better to John's account of Pentecost

The great Pentecost Event for John occurs quietly, at evening, on Easter Day
Gentle, simple and without great fanfare
Jesus breathes on them, slowly and purposefully

Receive the Holy Spirit he says to them
He breathes his peace on them
He breathes his spirit on them
He breathes on them a commission,
the power and authority to be the Church.

This is a lot like purposeful breath blown on ashy white corners of charcoal
The red glow extending outward beneath the white ash-
until it touches the edge of another piece of charcoal and passes the energy along.

God does this a lot.
Sometimes God's breath is so subtle we don't even recognize it
Are we surprised by this? We shouldn't be.
After all, there's a lot of hot air blowing out there,
a lot of wind trying to catch our sails,
worldly wind jockeying for our attention, our loyalty, our hope for a life well lived

No wonder if we sometimes need a dramatic Pentecost moment,
something to shake us up a bit,
something to jump start our faith.
Sometimes we risk squirting lighter fluid on smoldering coals-
ever ready to jump back once the flame erupts

Carrying this analogy a little further,
everyone knows that charcoal is best lit stacked in a pile – not individually
imagine trying to light the coals to a charcoal grill, piece by piece,
and then tossing each one individually into the grill

It's the same way with the Church, the Body of Christ
The red glow, the white ash moves out from one piece of coal to another,

until the heat of our shared spiritual energy spreads throughout the entire grill
But first, the coals have to be touching, gathered, grouped, interconnected.
That's the main reason we no longer do private baptisms

Our Prayer Book recommends that, as far as possible
Baptisms be reserved for four specific Feast Days of the Church
Today is one them, The Day of Pentecost

The other three are at the Easter Vigil
All Saints' Day (or the Sunday thereafter)
And the First Sunday of Epiphany (The Baptism of Our Lord)
(page 312 of the BCP)

Now we all know that pastoral needs often supercede Liturgical ideals,
It's hard enough to get parents, God-parents and Grandparents
altogether in one room on any given Sunday,
let alone on one of the four appointed Sundays in the liturgical year

And yet,
Many Episcopal Churches will baptize babies, children and adults today
Each soul will be named and claimed by God
Each soul will be sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism,
and marked as Christ's own forever

This action taken today will be complete and indissoluble
And it will be done in a group, in a unique and specific part of the Body of Christ
not in isolation but publicly and joyfully

Baptisms in the context of the Eucharist remind us that-
our job as baptized Christians is to take turns blowing on the coals
not the coals of judgment and exclusion
but the coals of acceptance and inclusion

If no one is there to fan the embers of faith, hope and love
The newly baptized may never come to know the peace of God-
which passes understanding
If we shrug off our turn to blow on the coals,
the red glow may never reach them

It's up to all of us, not just parents, God-parents and Grandparents-
It's up to all of us, to keep the energy Flow moving from us to them,
spreading the red glow and white ash through and among all of us,
until we become one single glow,
a glow emanating from the group, not from any individual piece of charcoal

Sometimes we come to church to get jump started
sometimes we come to touch and pass on the Holy
sometimes we come because it's our turn to blow on the coals
Sometimes we come to church to take a break from the busyness of our lives
and to be vulnerable to the movement of god's breath through the breath of others

The Feast of Pentecost

What a great day for a baptism

We may not know any of the people-
being sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism today

Doesn't matter; we welcome them into this wondrous mystery,
this communion of saints,
this thing we call The Church.

Today they become part of us and we become part of them.

And together we will keep the fire going.