

Mass of the Holy Spirit

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In her play, *Raisin the Sun*, the young African American writer, Lorraine Hansberry, traces a working class Black family's struggle against economic hardship and racial prejudice. The play underscores the importance of dreams for individuals and communities. One of the characters, Beneatha, recalls a sledding accident from her childhood that badly injured a friend. The ambulance rushed him to the hospital where the doctor set his broken bones and stitched-up a severe gash on his face. The next time that Beneatha saw her friend, he had just a little line down the middle of his face.

"I never got over that," she tells her boyfriend.

"What?" he asks.

"That was what one person could do for another, fix him up — sew up the problem, make him right again. That was the most marvelous thing in the world...I wanted to do that, I always thought it was the one concrete thing in the world that a human being could do. This was truly being God."

"You wanted to be God?" he asks.

"No, I wanted to cure. It used to be so important to me. I wanted to cure. It used to matter. I used to care. I mean about people and how their bodies hurt..."

Our first reading today pictures the Spirit of God as a flaming tongue hovering overhead. Beneatha, in the passage above, experienced the Spirit of God as a fire that burned in her heart, but cooled over time. Once, she wanted to cure. Once, it mattered to her. Once, she cared; but no more. We can dampen the flame; we can turn down the volume on God's Spirit in our hearts.

In the first reading, the people were gathered in one place, as we are now. They all received God's Spirit, but spoke different languages because they came from different places — just as we do. The Holy Spirit that we celebrate today is God's gift to every human being, not the exclusive possession of the Catholic or any other faith tradition. The great St. Augustine reminded Catholics that there are many whom the Church has that God does not have; and there are many whom God has that the Church does not have. Today we recall that we belong to God, and God is not limited by denominational boundaries or religious creeds. God's Spirit is alive in the heart of every person who cares "about people and how their bodies hurt."

God gifts each of us with that same Holy Spirit of caring, not for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world — that it may be set right again; that its pain may be eased and its divisions healed. That is where God's Holy Spirit would take us — toward a world where,

as we will soon pray, “hatred is quenched by mercy, vengeance gives way to forgiveness and nations seek the way of peace together.”

The impulse to care, the desire to make a difference, the call to compassion and understanding – is the Holy Spirit at work in our own lives and our world. We can dampen the flame; we can turn down the volume on God’s Spirit in our heart and turn up the volume of the spirit of ruthless ambition or the spirit of unbridled greed or the spirit of unlimited selfishness or the spirit of vanity and self-indulgence.

The power of the images from Hurricane Katrina – persons abandoned for days on roof tops and in stiflingly hot attics; men and women shoulder-high in water with babies or desperately needed supplies carried over head; or flooded hospitals and care facilities for the elderly and infirmed; bloated corpses floating in a sea of toxic waste – all serve as stark and compelling evidence that our world desperately needs persons shaped and driven by God’s Holy Spirit and not those other voices that all too often overpower and silence the word of God.

That our USF community is blessed with an abundance of such persons is evidenced by the spontaneous response to accept as many students as we could – far more than any other Bay Area university; by students who agreed to take an extra roommate and turn lounge space into living space; by staff who worked tirelessly to accept and process students; by faculty who spent hours advising and accepted additional students into class; by all those who offered rooms to students and contributed funds to support relief work, including the parishioners of St. Ignatius Parish.

The power of the images from these past 10 days lies not just in their raw depiction of human suffering, but in what they tell us about ourselves – that we are a country where the poor, the weak, the vulnerable and too many persons of color are left all alone to fend for themselves – abandoned and neglected amidst a sea of indifference that denies them the protection, the opportunity, and the support that many of us take for granted.

In face of this reality, we gather together to pray; to remember that God’s Holy Spirit dwells in each one of us; to remind ourselves of the hope that this Spirit offers to a world that badly needs to be fixed up and set right again; a hope that will come to fulfillment through those of us who faithfully and courageously trust God’s Holy Spirit more than the shallow, empty promises of a passing world.

Today we celebrate that God sends each one of us and all of us together to heal the suffering of our world, “to care about people and how their bodies hurt.” We celebrate a God who, if we are receptive, will renew us, make us living signs and recreate us to serve God’s purpose in this place and at this time.