

Sunday, May 27, 2007
Given by the Rev. M. Peter Harer

Pentecost Sunday Year C

Have you ever gone to a new place, whether a church, town, school, store, or even a home and sensed that the place had a certain presence about it? You might even call that sense of presence the “spirit” of the place. To describe a place, we might use words like welcoming, friendly, hospitable, serene, calm, open; even holy. On the other hand, we might describe a place as unfriendly, inhospitable, suspicious, filled with tension, unwelcoming, cliquish; even oddly sinister. In the first case we would say to people, “I really had a good feeling about that place.” In the second instance we might say, “I really had a bad feeling about that place.” For lack of a better term, we would say that one place had a “good spirit” about it, while the other had a “bad spirit.”

Its curious, isn't it how places can have a certain feel about them even when no one is there. A school with lots of art work on the wall, bulletin boards filled with notices of activities, and where the place is clean but not necessarily fastidiously so can give the impression that it is a place where students and teachers like to be. But then we have all no doubt been in schools where something didn't feel quite right; where the place just didn't have the sense of life and vitality about it. You might even say that the place gives you the creeps.

I remember about seven or eight years ago or so, we planned a week's vacation at a resort not too far from here. The brochure look inviting enough and

we were told that there were lots of amenities for kids and adults. So Liz called and made reservations. We pulled into the driveway of the place, and immediately we sensed that this place wasn't for us. Liz and I looked at each other but were afraid to say anything. The grounds of the place were not very well kept at all; the staff in the reception area were not especially friendly; and when we got to our cabin, our hearts sank. The furniture was old and broken; the walls hadn't been painted in who knows how long; and used charcoal had been dumped just outside the door. We both said to each other, "I'm not spending one night here." We got back in the car, returned to the reception desk and got our money back. For that night at least, we ended up in a nice country inn with good food and comfortable beds. We then spent the rest of our vacation at home.

Well as we all are no doubt aware, churches, too, have their own unique personalities. As with every other place or organization, first impressions of a church can attract people or turn them off almost immediately. As you enter a new church, are the grounds nice looking and the building well kept? When you walk through the door, do you sense that the regulars are glad to see you and receive you with hospitality? And do the regulars seem to genuinely like and enjoy each other even while reaching out to you, a stranger? Is the worship and music uplifting and easy to follow? Are children welcomed and respected? Is the minister

approachable and do the sermons make any sense? These are all things that churches should ask themselves as they seek to attract and appeal to newcomers.

So far everything I have said about churches is important, but there is still one thing I have left out. That is, does a sense of God's love and grace pervade that church? Do the people in that church show that they strive to take their Christian life and vocation seriously? Is that church's outreach to the community and the world central to its ministry? What opportunities are there for lay people to nurture their spiritual growth and development? Does that church have a strong sense of mission and purpose that serves to inspire and draw others in? These too are pertinent questions.

A long, long time ago, the disciples of Jesus didn't have a clue about how to start a church. Jesus had left them rather abruptly and gone back to his home in the cosmos. In the meantime, the disciples sat bewildered and uncertain about what to do next. You can imagine one or more of the disciples saying to Peter, "Okay Pete, you're in charge now. What are we supposed to do?" We can likewise imagine Peter sitting with his face covered with both hands and rocking back and forth in fetal position. Then we are told something amazing happened. The sound of a rushing wind blew through the house and what looked like tongues of fire rested on the disciples. They began to speak in foreign languages even though they had never spent a day in French, German or English class. People from all over

the civilized world could understand the disciples speaking in their native languages. And from that moment the church was off and running because the spirit of God had filled the church with power.

Please understand that I am not being critical or negative when I say that once the Holy Spirit of God filled the disciples of Jesus on that first Pentecost, they didn't first decide to plan a Chinese auction, roast beef dinner, or rummage sale. Nor did they appoint a committee to pick what color carpet to buy for the church building they were planning. What they did was to proclaim in word and deed the new thing that God was doing in the world in Jesus Christ. All people, everywhere, were now invited to share God's love. All the barriers of race, language, creed and every other source of division between human beings was shattered when the Spirit of God bound them together as one community in Christ.

What is the spirit in this place? Can people feel it, sense it? Is it a spirit of love, acceptance, friendship, welcome? Is there the sense that where the spirit of God is leading is more important than what we as individual's prefer or want? I believe that is the case; I pray that is the case. And if it is the case, I trust that the spirit of this place will flow out into the community and people will see and know that this a place where their spirits can be recharged, their souls fed and their lives renewed with God's love.