

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC  
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The Rev. J. Barry Kramer  
"Something Is There!"

*"On the evening of Easter day...Jesus came and stood among them and...breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" (John 20:19-23)*

The Rev. Canon Charles Taylor tells the story of a time when he was working in St. Paul's, Winston-Salem and was visiting some of the Sunday School classes between Services. It was Pentecost Sunday, and he stopped by the second grade classroom, where the teacher informed him that the class had been studying about the Holy Spirit. Stepping in where angels fear to tread, Canon Taylor asked if anyone could explain the Holy Spirit to him. Immediately one young man raised his hand and said, "Well, it's a lot of air, but there's something there!"

Indeed, something *is* there, but do any of us really understand the nature and function of the Holy Spirit? Why, even the Gospel writers seem confused! At one point, John says that Jesus *"breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" John also claims this happened on the night of the Resurrection! Luke, assuming that he is also the writer of the Book of*

Acts, tells us in the lesson that the Holy Spirit was given on Pentecost, fifty days later! What really happened? When did the Holy Spirit really come? Or if the Holy Spirit came more than once, what happened in between? Fifty days is a lot of air, but there must be something there!

It's been suggested that the Holy Spirit is like an onion; multi-layered, yet always the same; without core, heart or pit, yet consistent throughout. Every time you think you've got a grip on it, another layer peels off! Raw, it's kind of strong, but let it simmer and only the flavor comes out. Boiled down, there's a lot of air, but something is there.

Could it be that the Holy Spirit, like an onion, comes in layers? Who among us cannot recall the times when God has been revealed to us, as it were, in layers? My ordination, and the years which have followed, have been like that. Well I remember that cold, snowy day many years ago when I knelt before the lovable older man who was my Bishop and replied to his suddenly very stern questions: "Do you promise...etc?" Having answered, "I will, with God's help," the congregation then sang responsively with the Bishop the Veni, Creator

Spiritus: "Come Holy Ghost our souls inspire, enlighten with celestial fire..." This was followed by the imposition of hands, many hands, heavy hands, on my head, on my shoulders and on my back. It was like weights being added in layers; I knew not how I would ever bear them! There was also a lot of air, but something was *definitely* there!

Looking back over the years that have followed that high moment in my life as a Christian, the analogy of the onion seems even more appropriate. It's almost as if everything I need is already there, already given. All that is needed is to peel off an old layer, so that a fresh part of God's Spirit can work, *from within!* In between is often a lot of *hot air*; but underneath, something is there!

Could it be that today's texts are meant to teach us that the power of the Holy Spirit is such that once it is given, it is *always there*; but, like the onion, it can be released layer by layer?

Consider this: Jesus, in the freshness and power of his resurrected body, gives the Holy Spirit to his disciples on Easter Day. This power is so great that he doesn't even use the traditional laying-on-of-hands. Rather,

his breath is enough! Continuing the process, Jesus appears to many of the believers, teaching and re-enforcing many of the ideas he taught before. Then, in a climactic vision which we call the Ascension, Jesus disappears, having left detailed instructions for the next event. As promised, having gathered together in one place, "*a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house...*" (Acts 2:2) Now it does say that they were "filled" with the Holy Spirit, but could it not also be that they were *already* "filled" and that the power of the Spirit needed only to be *released*? The onion needed only to be peeled because in spite of a lot of air, there was already something there!

About twenty years ago, while I was still Rector of Holy Cross, Valle Crucis, Bishop Johnson made his annual visitation to the Parish. It so happened that we had three babies to be baptized and I asked the Bishop to do it. It's funny how you get a different perspective of something when someone else does it, and I got just that when the Bishop placed his hand on each child's head and, using blessed oil, marked each forehead with the sign of the cross, said each name, and then, "you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in

Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever." Please note the words, "*you are sealed...for ever.*" Through a direct successor of the disciples of Jesus, the Holy Spirit was given *and sealed inside* each little person *for ever!* That means there was enough given to last a lifetime! It is sealed inside so that, like an onion, only the layers need to be peeled off to release the power. As the child grows, there may be a lot of air; but there will *always* be something there!

Now let's look at what that means for each of us. It means first that we *become* Christians on the *day* of our Baptism. You can be 82 days or 82 years old on the day of your Baptism. It doesn't matter; you are *fully* a Christian if: 1) water is poured over your head in the name of the Trinity; 2) prayers are offered by the Bishop or Priest "in full sight of the congregation;" 3) you are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the sign of the cross of Christ. This presumes that you have promised beforehand (or your parents and godparents for you) to follow Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

It means second that once given, the power of the Holy Spirit can *never* be removed! Oh, to be sure, it can be

blocked, denied or *never released*; but it can *never be removed*! It does not need to be given again. Like the onion, the outer layers may rot, and there will be a lot of *bad air*, but something is always there!

I don't know if it really matters, because what soon becomes clear or muddy, depending on how you look at it, is the fact that the true nature of the Holy Spirit is a mystery, and it may always be so. It is there, but as air, it can only be known by its function, by a sudden and mighty, or gradual and gentle, blowing of a Christian in a certain direction, toward a certain place. In the end, perhaps the Psalmist is right; the only way to really know the Holy Spirit, to release it, to feel its presence, is to "be still, and know that (it) is God."

Or perhaps, to peel the onion!