

Pentecost 2011 – The Rev. Newell Graham

June 12

Growing up in Cynthiana, Kentucky, all the kids who were my friends knew about the house in our little town that was haunted!

I can still picture that house in my mind...It was a big old frame house and if it had ever been painted, all the traces of that paint had long ago worn away. Those boards had seen a lot of spring rains, blistering summers, and winter snows, and they were all cracked, bare and ugly. Oh – The windows of the house were cracked as well, but the people who lived in the house had placed adhesive tape over the cracks, giving the windows all the look of primitive mosaics. Heavy drapes were always drawn and not one of us could truthfully, honestly, say we'd ever seen the inside of that house, but no matter. We knew it was haunted! The fact that people actually lived there didn't make any difference to us. We just figured they were weird people who, we were convinced, shared their home with ghosts.

I remember that any kid who wouldn't run up on the porch of that house and stop for an instant (which seemed like an hour), any kid who wouldn't accept the dare to do that was considered "chicken", and that kid's life was made miserable by the other kids". Chants of "You're nothin' but a CHICKEN" would ring through the neighborhood.

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Well, I did it! I ran up on the porch and counted to FIVE and then ran back to the sidewalk feeling surprised at what I'd just done. The sidewalk never felt so good! It was a brave and gutsy thing to do, I believed...to pause on the porch of a house we KNEW to be the realm of ghosts! Haunted!

As I grew up a little, I didn't think about the haunted house all that much...none of us did. But when we'd ride by on our bikes, or even safe and secure in our parents' automobiles, we'd feel a little shudder as we looked at that old house and imagined its ghostly inhabitants.

When, as a young lad, I found my way into the Episcopal Church there in Cynthiana, something went on in that church that really made me think and wonder. We sang about a ghost...We SANG about a GHOST!!

At the First Christian Church, where I'd gone to Sunday school some, I remembered lots of songs about God the Father and Jesus Christ – but in that little Episcopal Church we sang not only about the Father and the Son, but also about the Holy Ghost! – “Glory be to the Father, Son and Holy Ghost” (Gloria Patri).

Up to that point in my life, I had thought of ghosts in only one way – as creepy residents of our town's haunted house – but, here we were, *in church*, singing the praises of a ghost...the Holy Ghost!

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I remember thinking that only God could pull that off – only God could make a ghost “holy” – because all us kids knew that ghosts were sinister, and evil, and certainly up to no good.

No, that notion of a *Holy* Ghost was a real stretch for me that then, even though this was obviously very important in the Episcopal Church, which itself was becoming more and more important to me.

Well, here I am much, much, later and it’s Pentecost – the feast that commemorates the gift of the Holy Ghost, or Holy “Spirit”. Sometimes, when I try to understand about the Holy Spirit or the Holy Ghost, it’s as though I’m standing there on the sidewalk trying to get me nerve up to dart up on the porch of that *haunted* house – pause long enough to demonstrate my bravery, and run back to the sidewalk. I think that it is because I am thinking about a “spirit” or “ghost”. I don’t know what to expect. I’m not scared exactly...I just don’t know what to expect...

Even now, as a priest, I teach about Jesus promising his disciples that he would not leave them “comfortless”, that he would send the “comforter”, “advocate” and “counselor” – The Holy Spirit. I teach this, I believe this, but I CANNOT define it completely so I still want to run off the porch, as it were, and

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back to what I know...to what I can imagine at least; to what I can fathom. I can try to imagine God as Father and Jesus as Son, but the Holy Ghost, that's different!

Well, this is the way it is: Precise definition is always going to elude us mortals. Our minds are limited and finite. God the Holy Spirit will always defy our need for total understanding, but there are many things we know about the Holy Spirit from Sacred Scripture and from our own experience (which is, maybe, the best and most convincing teacher of all). I have always thought of the Holy Spirit in this way: the Holy Spirit is the power and the presence of God in us, the power and presence of God in our everyday lives.

Each of us received the Holy Spirit when we were baptized. In that moment we became members of the church. The church is a community of people called by God into a relationship with Him and with one another. Nurtured by prayer, word and sacrament we are constantly open to fresh infusions of the strengthening presence and power of the Holy Spirit. God lavishes His blessed Spirit upon us!

Another thing to be said about the Holy Spirit is that it is highly contagious. When Peter and his friends were caught up in it there in Jerusalem everybody thought they were drunk, even though it was early day. They were! They were high on the power of God. All of their natural hesitation and backwardness had given

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way to the excitement about what God could do in them and through them. They had caught it! God breathed Himself, His Spirit, into them and they knew that they were no longer limited by what they alone could do.

Don't you see? It's the same with us. God's Spirit is in us and we can do what we never thought possible. We can endure what we believed would surely finish us. We can manage to love those we consider unlovable...which comes in mighty handy when we are members of a congregation. When this, or any, church is really functioning the way a church is supposed to work – it is because the Holy Spirit is active in and through its members. That's a wonderful thing to experience, isn't it?

Back there in Cynthiana, I would walk past that old house we'd decided was haunted and it would always make me shiver with fear. Even on cold days it seemed colder near that house. Was it haunted? Probably not. Back then all I could do was hurry home, and standing there in the warmth of the kitchen, put the thought of the ghosts in the old house far, far away from me.

Now I understand myself and all of you to be children of God and, as such, enabled and empowered by God's Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost. I would go so far as to say that none of us would be who we are without the Blessed Spirit residing in

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us. That blessed Spirit is a big part of who we are. We are not called to rush off the porch, to have only brushed quickly against the Holy Spirit. We are called to, what I like to call, “Radical Availability”. We are called to dare to open ourselves to God’s action in our lives, to surrender to God’s will, and to be present to the Holy Spirit as it is present to us.

What will happen? I don’t know. But I do know this: we are not simply material beings. We have a spiritual dimension as well. To be spiritual is not to be pale, and shapeless like an unmade bed. To be spiritual is to be inhabited by God, shaped by God, and committed to becoming everything one can be. God’s Holy Spirit within us makes that possible. We cannot do it, but God can. So, happy Pentecost – the Feast of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost – and relax. There’s no need to run off the porch.