

*A sermon given on Pentecost Day, June 12, 2011  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,  
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

***Caught by the Spirit:  
Kissing Icons, Cheering Baptists, Hosting South Africans***

It was a sunny Saturday afternoon three weeks ago, when Tricia, Ethan, and I wandered into an Orthodox church in St. Petersburg, Russia, where Ethan was completing a semester of study. Holy Trinity Cathedral sits on the grounds of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery, with golden domes on the outside, and a cavernous interior packed with icons and votive candles. A handful of tourists wandered the nave, peering curiously at the high ceiling and tall icon screen, while scores of devout Orthodox faithful came and went – stopping into the church for a private prayer at their favorite icon, before heading off on the day's errands.

The Russian babushka – the “grandmother” – was everywhere in the former, Soviet Russia. Typically portly and fairly short, with a heavy coat no matter the weather, and the requisite head scarf at all times, the babushka was a force to be reckoned with. Always she had a word of instruction, reprimand, or unsolicited advice. The babushka in that old mold is not as omnipresent now, in the days of the New Russia. But in the churches, babushka is still in charge.

On that Saturday afternoon, as we wandered the cathedral admiring its beauty, a babushka approached Ethan, in front of an icon and its candle stand. She barked out a quick instruction, gesturing at a small rug which lay on the stone floor. Ethan understood that she needed help with the rug. But what, precisely was he to do with it? Russian prefixed verbs are notoriously challenging. Was he to roll it up? Turn it around? Fold it over? Who knew? Ethan hesitated, and his parents were no help. We felt pleased that she had taken us for religious faithful, and not just casual tourists. But we were linguistically flummoxed.

For a moment, the babushka grew impatient. But then she recognized her mistake. Where were we from? she asked. And why were we here? Soon she was very excited that she had become host to a family of American pilgrims. Nearby were the relics of St. Alexander Nevsky, the 13<sup>th</sup>-century patron saint of that monastery. An icon of the saint stands in front of the reliquary, covered with glass. A long line of devout pilgrims is perpetually queued up to kiss the icon, after the fashion of Orthodox piety. Our new babushka friend was determined that we should make our cathedral pilgrimage complete with this devotional act. With singular energy she escorted us to the head of the line, shooing aside those already at the icon. “We have guests!” she muttered over their objections. Carefully she cleaned the glass over the icon, instructed us in posture and sequence, and stepped aside proudly. Of course, we complied. To be welcomed so graciously, treated so kindly, and offered the greatest spiritual blessing this woman could extend – this was a gift not to be refused.

It was swift and surprising. But in that moment, a barrier was broken down, an unexpected thing had happened, and a spiritual gift was offered. It was a Pentecost moment, for such is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Today is the Feast of Pentecost. Once again we have heard of that astonishing day two thousand years ago when the disciples were gathered in the aftermath of Jesus' ascension. As Jesus had promised before his departure, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples with a new power. And, lo and behold, they found themselves able to tell the story of Christ with an intense new vigor. And, lo and behold, the crowds of people from every land were able to understand that testimony. And, lo and behold, the disciples' confusion and anxiety was transformed into confidence and strength for the months and years to come. It was swift and unexpected. But in that moment, barriers were broken down, and unexpected things happened, and a spiritual gift was offered. It was the original Pentecost moment, and such is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit was at work this past Monday evening at the Masonic Temple in Cleveland. As you know by now, more than 2,000 people gathered that night from more than 40 religious congregations in Cuyahoga County, for the Founding Assembly of Greater Cleveland Congregations. One by one, representatives from each of the congregations identified themselves, pledged to help shape a "greater Cleveland", and received a lively ovation from the crowd. The applause was as thunderous for the small synagogue which could send just six representatives as it was for the large church that sent four hundred. One hundred forty-one St. Paul's members were there and can tell you of the energy, excitement, and inspiration of that event – in which barriers have broken down, unexpected things have happened, and a spiritual gift has been offered. It was a Pentecost moment. Such is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Two weeks from today, our sixteen visitors from South Africa will have arrived for their pilgrimage of friendship and inter-Anglican fellowship. Until recently, who would have imagined a group of Xhosa-speaking teenagers from a hardscrabble township in Africa, sharing ice cream sundaes with our kids at St. Paul's or joining us in serving a meal at St. Luke's on Cleveland's West Side? And yet, that is just what is about to happen, thanks to a partnership in which barriers are being broken down, unexpected things are happening, and a spiritual gift is being offered. It is a Pentecost relationship, and such is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Kissing an ancient icon at the invitation of a babushka. Cheering for righteousness with Baptists and Jews in a Masonic Auditorium. Welcoming Anglican teenagers from the other side of the world. The Holy Spirit is moving still, as it moved that Pentecost Day two thousand years ago.

And in your own life – where is the Spirit at work? I wonder. Where do you need it? Where do you yearn for it? Where do you see it, even now? Where in your life are there barriers to be broken, unexpected events to be (paradoxically) expected, spiritual gifts to be received?

The gift of the Spirit is on offer. Pray for it. Wait for it. Hope for it. Watch for it. Rejoice at it.

Pentecost blessings to you!