

Sermon for the Feast of Pentecost  
June 4, 2006  
St. Mary of the Hills, Blowing Rock, NC  
The Reverend Jeanne Finan

### **Pelicans**

The truth is they are clumsy.  
Awkward.  
They are sometimes described as “chunky”.  
Sometimes the word “jowly” is used.  
You can’t miss that they have big clown feet.  
That they shovel in their food when they eat.  
They express their sexual ardor by turning bright red in the face  
and growing a giant wart on their nose.<sup>1</sup>

That is what we hear this morning in the scripture readings.  
That surprising description of the disciples.  
Oh. Did you miss that part?

You know I’m teasing you.  
We didn’t exactly hear that as the description of the disciples.

Actually, the chunky jowly clown-footed food shoveling  
bright red wart growing characters are not the disciples as all.  
They are American White Pelicans.  
I read that description in a wonderful article by Mel White in the June issue  
of the National Geographic magazine.

But there are similarities.  
Similarities between pelicans and those first century disciples.  
Similarities between pelicans and us, twenty-first century disciples.

But before we talk about pelicans,  
I want to first talk about Pentecost.

Today is the day of Pentecost in our Church year.  
Pentecost—which comes from the Greek word *pentekoste*,  
which simply means “fiftieth”—  
and Pentecost is the last day of the fifty days of Easter.

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<sup>1</sup> Mel White, “Ungainly Grace: The American White Pelican,” National Geographic, June 2006, pages 84-97.

After the service of Evening Prayer tonight  
the Paschal candle,  
the light which guided us out of the darkness of Lent  
into the early morning of Easter,  
the Paschal candle is removed from the church after Pentecost.  
The season of Easter, those Fifty Great Days, ends with Pentecost.

But Pentecost is not just the end of Easter.  
Pentecost is the beginning of the Church.

Pentecost is a feast day which celebrates the Holy Spirit coming down  
and resting on the Apostles.  
It wasn't a lightning strike.  
The Spirit came and RESTED on each one of them.  
The Spirit came to stay.

One of the Christian symbols for the Holy Spirit is the descending dove—  
you see it in some of our stained glass windows here in the church.

But another symbol for the Holy Spirit is fire.  
(If you look carefully at the cover of your service bulletins,  
you will see a little flame over each of the disciples' heads.  
Those aren't giant waterdrops or teardrops,  
those are little flames.)

The disciples have just been officially  
set on fire by God.  
The love and grace of God through the Holy Spirit will empower them  
and remain with them  
and transform not only them, but the entire world.

Pentecost is the day we are set on fire by the power of God's love—  
Not a destructive, consuming fire, but a purifying, sanctifying fire.  
The Holy Spirit comes upon all of us.  
It does not arrive in individual single size portions.  
This Spirit arrives with an enormous rush  
and fills the entire house.  
The Holy Spirit shows up super-sized!  
At that moment  
all boundaries, all divisions are blown away.

As Paul writes in his letter to the Church at Corinth—  
We are all baptized into one body—  
Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—  
We all drink of one Spirit.

And that is truly something to celebrate.  
So we do.  
With this feast day of Pentecost.

Now back to those pelicans.

I described for you earlier the essence of the pelican  
when walking around on the ground.

But hear this description of a pelican in flight:

*...in the air...pelicans are truly transformed. They rise with surprising speed  
for so large a bird...they soar in great circles, dozens of birds wheeling together  
in an aerial ballet...*

*...the white pelican [is] majestic, magnificent, graceful and truly beautiful.*

*...Our clumsy bird stood up, waddled forward,  
Spread its wings and took off.*

*...As Audubon wrote, 'how changed do they seem!'<sup>2</sup>*

The pelican is only its full and authentic pelican self  
when it can be seen as both its awkward grounded self  
**and** it's magnificent inflight self.  
For it is both.  
That is what makes it a pelican.

We can only live into our authentic selves  
if we accept both our often awkward, clumsy fully human selves--  
**and** also realize and celebrate the divine spark that God gives each of us.

And it is the community of God—the Church—  
that is here to fan the fire.  
to keep one another going and aflame with God's love.  
To use that holy fire to do justice  
And to offer kindness and to forgive—  
To forgive others and to forgive ourselves

That little flame over the disciples' heads on the bulletin cover?  
It is over your head and your head and your head and my head—  
It is there.  
From the moment of our creation in the image of God.  
It is there.

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<sup>2</sup> White, p.89.

And with our baptism God makes it official--  
we are sealed by the Holy Spirit  
and marked as Christ's own forever.

And on the Day of Pentecost  
We rejoice.

In John's gospel  
Jesus arrives and breathes on the disciples and says,  
"Receive the Holy Spirit."

Receive.

That is what we are called to do.  
Receive.  
Receive all that God has created us to be.  
Grounded. Soaring.  
Awkward. Magnificent.  
Clumsy. Graceful.  
A total mess.  
Truly beautiful.

And one more comment from that National Geographic article on pelicans:

*The birds live in large flocks,  
working together to catch fish.*<sup>3</sup>

Welcome to the Church.

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<sup>3</sup> White, page 87.