



“By Their Fruits: Pentecost and the Work of the Spirit”

**Sunday, May 24, 2026
11 am Service**

Rev. Pete Burgess

Summary: On Pentecost, Father Pete reflects on the dramatic arrival of the Holy Spirit—not simply as a spectacle of wind and fire, but as the profound moment when God’s Spirit is poured out upon human flesh in a new and transformative way. Using the image of tending his garden (and his admittedly beloved blowtorch for battling weeds), he explores how spiritual life, like gardening, requires discernment, cultivation, and patience.

He contrasts two common distortions of faith in today’s world: an ungrounded fascination with mystical or ecstatic spirituality, and a purely moralistic faith devoid of spiritual vitality. One without the other, he argues, is incomplete and potentially dangerous. True Christian life requires both Spirit and substance—mystical openness to God’s movement and moral grounding in Christlike action.

Father Pete points to Scripture’s clear test for discerning authentic spiritual life: fruit. The work of the Spirit is known not by dramatic claims or emotional intensity, but by what it produces—love, justice, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control, and care for the vulnerable. By contrast, lives or systems producing fear, division, dominance, greed, and hostility reveal a different spirit at work. This discernment applies personally, communally, and even politically.

Drawing on the ordination of Holy Trinity’s new curate, Kristen Blackerby, Father Pete reminds the congregation that Pentecost is not just about extraordinary moments but about the ongoing calling of ordinary believers. Each Christian has gifts to offer for the common good, and each is called to tend their own patch of God’s larger garden. The Spirit’s work is communal, life-giving, and meant to bear beautiful fruit for the sake of the world.

Full Sermon:

Good morning. Happy Pentecost. It's a very special day, a very important day in our church calendar, in the life of our rhythm of worship throughout each year, and this year, of course, it has also fallen on a major national holiday, and so it does feel a little bit like that wind, that mighty wind of the Spirit has perhaps blown a few people to other places, but thank you for being with us today. Thank you for worshiping with us from afar. It is this great day of the Holy Spirit, this great day of fire, and tongues, and gifts, and the outbreking of God's Spirit in the midst of humanity, and there are so many different images, or just starting places that you might pick for a sermon on this day, but the one that's been in my mind the most has been my new blowtorch.

I, this spring, became the proud owner of a blowtorch, and as I've been thinking about fire, and water, and Spirit, I've been thinking about my new favorite toy. Emma and I, and our girls, love gardening, and we've spent the last few years in our house with our yard, trying to get it into better shape, and take some old garden beds and revive them, and I've also cut out some new garden beds, and I've created a border around them with all the rocks from our yard that have hit my mower as I've been doing this work, and really starting to be happy with how it looks, but part of the issue of that little rock border is that weeds grow up in it, and it's very hard to pull those weeds without just disrupting the whole thing, and not wanting to spray poisons all over where I'm about to grow vegetables, I decided that, of course, the only solution to my weed problem was a blowtorch, so thus the blowtorch, and I've been torching those weeds this spring, and it's been pretty effective, and I have to admit it's also very fun, and I do keep a hose nearby, but anyway, it's been good. I've been thinking about that torch, and I've been thinking about that element of fire together with water, and this process of trying to cultivate a little area of ground; we need heat and light, we obviously need the sun, and in this case I've been using this fire to cleanse off the weeds and get them out of the way, and prevent them from returning so fast, and in thinking about today, and thinking about scriptures, and thinking about this great event of Pentecost in the book of Acts, I've been thinking about that descending of the fire, but it's not so much that today is just about fire and spirit. The spirit of God has been at work and present throughout all of scripture, and all through time. What's different on Pentecost is the specific way in which God bestows the spirit onto flesh, so it is not a day of one single element, it is a day of the mingling of elements in a new way, of spirit and of flesh, and we are living in an age which, to my surprise in a lot of ways, is suddenly very interested in a lot of quarters in the spirit, the spiritual, the mystical, the ecstatic, the prophetic. You may or may not, I won't assume that it's on your devices, but I will tell you that a lot of young folks in particular, in their feeds on TikTok, YouTube, whatever, are encountering quite a lot of content about religious matters, and particularly about some of these highly sort of spiritual, mystical, ecstatic experiences. These things are being applied to society, to politics, to life.

I've had the experience numerous times in the last couple years, and I'm sure Father David has as well, of being approached by young people who have seen a bunch of this stuff, maybe worried about signs and portents in the heavens, blood and smoke and mist, like we heard about in the reading today. There's a lot of this around. There's a lot of this around. And it is mingling with all of the other, what would you say, influences that exist in our world. And it's quite compelling, and there is a part, I think, of all of us, and some people, it may be sharper than others, but there is a part of all of us that wants to experience God in this way, that wants to know God, and to feel, and to hear, and to see God at work, and so there is a very powerful draw here. There is also quite a lot of danger in following whatever new spiritual, mystical thing we encounter. Mysticism, which is the word I'm going to give to it, has to be tempered with another element.

The Spirit alone, with no correcting, guiding principles around it, can lead us to some very, very dangerous places. I would associate our own Church, our own tradition, the Episcopal Church, and just mainline Protestantism in general, less with a Pentecostal, mystical, ecstatic form of religion. You may disagree. And more with a kind of morally upright, conscious, social justice-focused approach to faith and to life, where a lot of our focus is on working to make a better world, through the tenets of our faith, and through our faithfulness. And so you could all sort of call that a morality, a morally driven faith. And what I'd like to say to you is that both are needed. On this day of Pentecost, where we've got Spirit meeting flesh, the mystical and the moral must meet as well.

We are living, as I said, in a time where the mystical can really take us off into some crazy directions. It needs moral correction. And, by the same token, if we as a Church, or any group of people, become so deadened to the life of the Spirit, and so determined not to be caught up in it, taken by it, find ourselves in this divine life, then we run the risk of becoming quite moralizing, pious, and not effective. One without the other is incomplete, and perhaps even quite dangerous. And so a lot of our work as Christians, as Christian communities, is trying to discern what is the right mix, what is the right blend of fire and of water and of earth, of Spirit and of flesh and of matter. How are these things meant to come to track? We can't just listen to every voice that comes our way, that tells us to go this way or that way.

How can we know? And luckily, Scripture has given us a pretty clear set of indications for how to know. We are to judge the work of the Spirit in our midst by the fruits that it bears. In my garden, no matter how much fun I have with my blow plants, no tomatoes, well, then it didn't really matter. It will be the fruit of those plants that holds up a mirror to me as a gardener, and it is the fruit of our lives that hold up a mirror to ourselves as spiritual beings, as people walking a Christian walk. And our lives can bear different kinds of fruit. We are told very clearly in Scripture to be looking out for the good fruits of faith and of hope and of love, the growth of the virtues in our midst, of justice and of temperance and of patience, and the other gifts and fruits like kindness and gentleness and self-control.

We are to look for these good things, to point to them, to celebrate them, to cultivate them, to share them with each other. But our lives can bear a different kind of fruit, and just as there are a lot of influences on us from all angle in our society, many of those influences are trying to take us towards a different set of fruits that are not of Scripture, not of the Bible, not of God. Fruits like wealth and power and importance and victory and dominance over one's opponents. Those are fruits, but very different kind of fruit, and they reflect back to us that we are not on the right path. We have not brought together spirit and flesh as we have been called to do. And so holding up this mirror to ourselves is something we are all called to do. We are called to do it personally as individuals.

We are called to do it in our families, whatever the shape of our family. We are called to do it socially and in our communities, and yes, also politically. And in a world where a time when politics and religion are mingling at just exponential rates constantly, and we

are being given messages of both that are mixed all together, it can be quite bewildering to know what is what. But again, we have been given this teaching to look for the fruits that we are bearing. Are we as a country, as a people, finding that the path that we are on is leading to a harvest of good fruits? Are the homeless being housed? Are the hungry being fed?

Are the naked being clothed? Is a stranger being cared for? Or are we seeing a different side, different kinds of fruits of enmity and hate and division and judgmentalness and fear?

I'll leave that to you. We are also called, as a community of faith, to hold this mirror up to ourselves as a parish. By virtue of us coming together, in spirit and in love, around Scripture and the labors that we offer for the good of each other and the world, are we bearing good fruit? I think that we are. That's my opinion. I hope you agree. We can always go deeper.

Having started with that image of the garden, I want to also offer another one which is more specific to the church, and this is an event that took place yesterday, which is the ordination of our new curate, who will be joining our staff in July, Kristen Blackerby, was ordained to the priesthood yesterday at All Saints in Birmingham. Beautiful service, wonderful gathering of clergy and laypeople and people who have been part of her life and her journey up to this point. And like any ordination service, it was a service deeply focused on the Spirit, on Spirit meeting flesh. In those services, we are pointing to a person, an individual, sometimes multiple at a time, who are being ordained to say, look, as a church, let's look and point and say, here in this person, the work of the Spirit that we read about in the New Testament and passages like we had in 1 Corinthians today, there it is at work. Those callings, those gifts, those are continuing to be formed, continuing to be called out of people, and here we are and we give thanks and we bless it. But, like every ordination service, this one too pointed out beyond that individual, it is much more than the person being ordained, it is the story of us as a people, as a church, as a body. The passage from 1 Corinthians today talks about that everything the Spirit gives will be for the build-up of the common good.

And so, just as this person has begun a vocation, each of us has a vocation. Maybe it changes at different points in our life, but we have gifts that are being called out and they complement one another and they work together for the good of the whole. And when it doesn't work together for the build-up of the body, then it is not of the Spirit, and we have got to take a fresh look at it. Each of us is called to bear good fruit for the common good, and without the evidence of that fruit, sometimes it takes time. It can take time. It's not a fast process. But when it becomes clear to us that the path we are on is not bearing that fruit, then it is time for a fresh look, it is time to go deeper, it is time to go further, it is time to reach out to others, to those around us, because there is something about this dynamic of Spirit and of flesh that we are missing.

Each of us is a gardener. We are all tending our own garden, our own heart, our own little plot. But to look up for an instant is to realize that ours is just a tiny piece of a big and wide and wild and unwallled garden that touches so many others all around us. And

what we put into our soil and what we bring up out of the earth and what we are able to share and to spread, all of that affects those around us just as they impact us. We are gardeners together, and we are gardeners together with this Spirit, this Spirit. This fire of tongues, this living water, these elements given by God just like sun and rain on the garden in my backyard, are to come together and to bring forth something beautiful, something fruitful, and something that we will be able to look at in this life and say, there it is, there is the work of the Lord, there is the fruit of the Spirit. So let us continue this work and be inspired by the Spirit and have faith that God will give the growth.

Amen.

To view the broadcast version of this sermon, [CLICK HERE](#).

The Lectionary readings for Pentecost are on the following pages: