This morning I want to focus on just three words from the Gospel reading: “all… of… them…” John the Baptist answers all of them. No one is left out. And then in Isaiah there is this great ingathering of everyone whom God has formed and made. So much of the Bible runs contrary to the divisions even the divisiveness of the times in which we live. Conversations in different settings this week have raised the issue of difference and inclusion. “Can I belong if I don’t agree with other members of the group?” Another worried, “I come to Saint Paul’s from a different religious tradition. Do I need to renounce that in order to become part of this church community?”

These questions are shaped by the wider context in which we live. And that context today is marked by division. We see the widening gap between rich and poor. There is a generational divide with the young finding it harder to set off on their own, leaving home only to return again. There are divisions of identity groups. Whites and Blacks, Latinos and Asians, men and women, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, straight folks and gay, liberals and conservatives – all feel threatened. They react by closing ranks so that they become more insular. Increasingly it is us-versus-them. Hate crimes have increased 20% in the last 3 years. And this is not just in the United States. We find it in other countries as well.

In the church we can be tempted to fall in line with this exclusionary thinking. I worship at this time while others choose a different service. The implication being, what’s wrong with them! I support music while others don’t. There is the tug between children in Godly Play and children in choristers. And I haven’t even gotten to different shades of belief. It is natural in the social context around us to focus on differences in an either-or manner. Take note though, the same Spirit that rested upon Jesus at his baptism is the
Spirit that spoke through the prophets. And if there is any prophetic word for our day, it is that we continue to divide and exclude at our own peril.

In the Book of Acts, we heard today of the Samaritan Pentecost. The Samaritans received the Holy Spirit. To understand the significance of this, realize that Samaritans as a group by the time they were visited by Peter and John had been hated by Jews for over two hundred years. A synagogue prayer had asked that they not be partakers of eternal life. Samaritans were outcasts. Peter and John, like the earliest Christians, of course were Jews. And yet it was to the Samaritans they were sent. The point is that the Holy Spirit is inclusive not exclusive. There is a Pentecost for everyone. The Samaritans who had been on the outside are being gathered in. They are given the Spirit that is like a spiritual glue holding “all of them” (there is that reference to John the Baptist again) together with all their differences. Of course we can belong if we don’t all agree. We learn from one another. Difference forces us to think. It helps us go deeper, with more understanding, in our own beliefs. In the 6th century Benedict of Nursia wrote a monastic rule. In it the whole community would be summoned for counsel. “The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel,” he writes, “is that the Spirit often reveals what is better to the younger.” The newer, younger members that one might dismiss or who might have a contrary point of view, those are the ones you might want to pay attention to, Benedict says. They have the Spirit as well. They have insights to offer. The Spirit holds diverse peoples and perspectives together in community or we might say in unity, not uniformity but in unity.

The Holy Spirit is also like a refiner’s fire. Jesus would baptize with Holy Spirit and fire. They are not too different things. The Holy Spirit is like fire. It refines and purifies. In King Solomon’s time Israelite refineries excelled. They operated with fire by night and smoke by day. A psalm says: “The promises of the Lord are promises that are pure, silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times” (Ps.12: 6). The fiery refining process melts the ore so that the dross or impurities can be removed.

It raises the question for me, what are the impurities that cause divisiveness and exclusionary thinking? What is the dross that needs to be refined? I think it may be the fear of being vulnerable. Isaiah says, don’t be afraid to pass through the waters. Who knows what is lurking in that water? The listeners of this prophet would think of the mythical waters of chaos.
Remember the creation story in Genesis when darkness covered the face of the deep. All is formless, uncertain. That’s not some place to which you want to go. But it is there that the wind or Spirit from God swept over the face of the waters. Or brooded over the waters like a dove, in the same way that the Spirit descended upon Jesus at baptism in bodily form like a dove. “Do not fear,” Isaiah says, even when the chaotic waters of the deep threaten to overwhelm you. I, the Lord, will be with you. It is scary to open up to someone whose life experience is different. We might wish to stay with our own kind. We might rather be invulnerable, not expose ourselves to hurt. But that desire to be invulnerable is dross. It needs to be refined away. Let’s risk getting to know one another. In doing so even when we disagree we may find a deeper version of ourselves. We will find the Spirit who brings us through uncertainty to the promise of love that as the psalm says is purified seven times.

This holds true for religious backgrounds as well. If “all of them” are to be responded to as the Gospel says, we have to be vulnerable enough to hear what another tradition says. The Buddhist Nhat Hanh explained. “There are small ‘b’ buddhists and big ‘B’ Buddhists as well as small ‘c’ christians and big ‘C’ Christians. The small ‘b’ buddhists and the small ‘c’ christians can easily talk to each other. The big ‘B’ Buddhists and big ‘C’ Christians cannot. I am a small ‘b’ buddhist, and Dan Berrigan and Thomas Merton (a Jesuit activist and a Trappist monk) are small ‘c’ christians.” We need to be vulnerable enough to be lower case whites and blacks, latinos and asians, men and women, christians, jews, and muslims, gay and straight, liberal and conservative, so that we can talk to one another, and not isolate into an us-versus-them divide.

We are sent to one another, even to those who are most different, as Peter and John were sent to the Samaritans. I like to think we are lower case people who can listen to the other without our own identities being threatened. Sure we’ll be changed by others and change them in the process. But I think this need only be a deepening of the “self” that we understand ourselves to be. From whatever faith tradition that has shaped us we are included. There is an interchange of insights. It is the way it has to be in true community. If you find others who look at the world differently, you nevertheless belong. The Spirit is the connective tissue of a refined love. Where others divide the Spirit unites. Where some choose invulnerability, the Spirit risks openness. Where some need an unchallengeable, upper case identity, the Spirit encourages the
humility of a lower case life. It’s a simple idea captured in three small words: “all… of…them…”

*Amen.*