

May 31, 2020 “Pentecost: The Birthday of the Indwelling Spirit”

Acts 2:1-8; 11b-21.

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“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

At the time of Pentecost, a great democratization of spirit took place. Its mystery and miracle became directly available to all, needing no intermediary, pouring the Christ Spirit into all human souls. The crowd, which had gathered for the Jewish Feast of the Oaths, to celebrate God’s covenant with Noah, Abraham, and Moses, were now taken by surprise by the wind of the spirit. Suddenly, they could hear and understand each other. No more would there be a need for priest or emperor or prophet or king to mediate between God and each human being. Not even Jesus’ earthly presence would be needed. The tongues of fire which rested on each on that first Birthday of the church can be imagined as the action of a passionate God baptizing each into the passion of his/her own calling.

Now suddenly, people who spoke different languages could understand each other. Does that mean that now they all began to think alike? Not likely, at least I hope not. When everyone thinks alike it is very doubtful that anyone is doing any thinking at all. Human imaginations, cognitive understandings, verbal expressions and cultural stories are deliciously varied when they deal with anything that really matters. It, no doubt, sounded pretty chaotic there in Jerusalem on Pentecost. Folks were probably “blown away” by what they experienced. The miracle wasn’t about a uniformity of perception or expression, but was rather, a powerful welcoming of individuality and diversity. It wasn’t a threateningly noisy crowd but a promisingly joyful one.

Welcoming Diversity, finding a common language, experiencing the winds of change and the movement of possibility, all characterized the Day of Pentecost. Even though we know how the story will continue over time with schisms and power struggles and the building of structures that are motivated in part by greed and a deep need to have control over human experience, expression and behavior, in this moment, all came together. In this moment, unity, self-expression, and passion were joined.

Not just priests and ministers, monks and martyrs, not just the spiritual giants throughout history but each of us, in our time, are called by God to be mediums or channels of the divine. On Pentecost, the wind of the spirit, became equally available to each-- man and woman, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, adult and child, peasant and king. And yet, this new life of indwelling spirit would not be only a personal matter but would always be radically communal. The church born on that day was a **community** of believers; rambunctious, unruly and probably just as self-contradictory as the folks in the congregations of most churches today. But then as now, and as the words of Joel, which Peter quoted from scripture described, these folks also received the eternal gifts of the spirit; prophesy, teaching, visioning and dreams of the holy. These were now accessible.

As I pondered this touch of the flame of spirit, this passion of Pentecost, on this very turbulent and divisive week in our nation—a week in which George Floyd, another black man was killed by a police officer, it occurred to me that one of the things we are being called to, today, is a radically different kind of speaking and listening. We have come to a tragic impasse in the way we relate to each other. We assume we have a right to express our opinions but have no obligation to understand where these often misguided, privileged and reactive opinions and feelings have come from and why we assume they are valid. We have a right to our perspectives, but these perspectives often have no firm foundation and their shaky foundations go unrecognized. In our public disagreements we are often

oblivious to what the other, who has now become our “opponent” believes. We are so busy defending our egos, our biases, our enmity, our wealth, that we won’t allow ourselves to really take in who the other is, what his life is about and what values we might learn from listening to him, like his desire to have more accessibility to jobs and property—the desire to be heard. We aren’t respectful of the other, we are afraid of the other, we scapegoat the other, we dehumanize the other. And when you add real diversity to the mix, such as black and white diversity and the racial tension, the danger grows greater and the stakes grow higher. Protests are now taking place in cities all over our country, the pain and anger is boiling up and over. Violence inflames violence which inflames more violence.

Spirit is intimately present in all living things. Spiritus in Latin means “breath of God.” If we truly believe that we carry this spirit within us and that our neighbor also has access to this spirit, we wouldn’t be *afraid* to listen or to learn would we? In fact, we would feel *compelled* to listen to another’s story, another’s pain, another’s differences as if his diverse perspective is a gift to us rather than a threat. We may feel that the other’s woundedness by life events has controlled his thinking and made him reactive in feeling. We might feel that the other has come to flawed conclusions, or made wrong decisions, or taken disturbing actions. But the story of Pentecost reminds us that God’s divine intention is that we all, despite our many, many differences, have the capacity and the sacred calling to understand each other. That is why we are told that folks from far flung regions, speaking different languages, could communicate. The Pentecost indwelling spirit of the Holy One was given to us at this destiny moment, this radically life changing day, coming as the “Advocate”, the “Holy Spirit.”

The heavenly thunderstorm of wind and fire were transforming, bringing each of us the gift of enlightenment. Despite how un-enlightened most of us feel most of the time, all human beings have been touched by “a tongue of fire.” As Evelyn Francis Capel wrote in her book, *The Christian Year*, “True individuality in the spiritual life comes from the Holy Spirit...yet.. “That which is most individual and lives most intensely in our inward depths is likewise that which we have in common with other human souls, which enable us to understand that we are united in (our humanity).” “Individuality” was born into the faith that first Pentecost, but for better or for worse, we were not just renewed as individuals, but a whole collective body, was given birth as well. This body became the Christian Church, a faith without the distinction of race or tribe or clan, which would spread across the globe. When the Church swerves away from this truth, which it all too often does, it loses its connection to the indwelling spirit of God, a spirit which values diversity and unique and creative expressions of faith. It loses its spirit and becomes a shell of itself. But when, in inspired moments, it can hold fast, the inner life-giving flame of Pentecost becomes the most brilliant and powerful birthday candle there will ever be. In this week of deep pain, fear, and abuse of power—of long held anger at injustice, of buildings burning, and more lives threatened, we need to hold our flame of loving spirit even higher. White and black, we are called to admit the sin of racism, to recognize the violence of injustice and to stand up for its victims. We are called to listen and then to speak, to be a voice of love for our troubled times.