

1 Corinthians 12:3-13

Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. NRSV

Acts 2:1-21

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, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ NRSV

Holy Spirit, Living Breath of God!

June 8, 2014

I find that preaching on the more well-known stories in the bible are often the most difficult. Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, are such familiar stories and so deeply visual and detailed that trying to add anything to them or trying to tell them more creatively seems futile at best. We all know the stories so well. What could you possibly add to these stories, and especially Pentecost which has such powerful images and sounds? Violent wind, tongues of flame, spirit filled people speaking in other languages. My goodness, how can you top that?

But maybe we can shed a little light on the story by moving away from some of the special effects and moving our attention to a couple of the images and ideas that Luke might want us to understand in this story. The Pentecost celebration is not exactly what we think it is. This was a Jewish festival which happened 50 days after the Passover and was originally a celebration of the spring harvest, and later became a time to remember when Moses was given the law or the Torah on Mount Sinai. In Jerusalem, there were Jews who had come from all over the then known world to share in this celebration. Some had returned to live in this holy community and others were perhaps returning just as they often did for the Passover.

And I suspect that they are not all coming out of some legal obligation, though maybe some are, but rather, I suspect that they are coming to Jerusalem and coming to the temple seeking God. And probably like all pilgrims they are looking for the messiah as well. One has to assume that the Holy Spirit has already been preparing the way for the events that were about to unfold. Already preparing hearts to hear the good news.

And the story is also I think, about the disciples themselves. They have been learning to live in the world without Jesus being physically present and while there have been encounters with him they are feeling on their own for the moment. Maybe it has taken some time to understand all the things Jesus had been telling them. Maybe it has taken some time for them to gather together again after abandoning Jesus during his last hours. I'm sure they have had some dark hours and some real soul searching asking themselves the same questions we ask when we feel alone and distant from God. Where is he? How can we live in a world that is so hateful and cruel? Where is the Holy Spirit that was promised and how does that make any difference when I'm lying in a hospital bed with cancer, or a tornado just destroyed my entire community, or someone opened fire on innocent people killing thoughtlessly.

The disciples have been gathering together for some time now, praying, meditating, and remembering Jesus and the example he gave them. In the midst of that culmination of prayer who knows what happened! It certainly felt like a rush of wind and a burning flame and suddenly, they are out on the street proclaiming the message to all that would listen, that Jesus is the one they seek. Jesus is the Lord and Messiah that they have been looking for and all they need to do is repent. Change directions. "Hey, Everybody, God is here."

Maybe this is how the Holy Spirit works in our lives too, that little by little, we grow in faith and understanding, drawing us together as a family, until we finally need to let the world know that Jesus is offering something far better than the law. And I can't help but think that when those pilgrims who were coming to Jerusalem to open themselves to the community of faith were offered the unconditional love of Jesus, in whatever language they could hear it, why, the Spirit must have leapt in their hearts.

Another image that Luke wants us to see here has to do with language. There is a mirror image of this scene and I'll bet you can guess what it is? What other story in the Bible is about languages? That's right, the story about the tower of Babel. A story where language divided rather than brought together the people of God.

According to Marcus Borg, the Spirit on this Pentecost undoes what happened on the Tower of Babel as it brings back together the broken and divided community of humankind. It is a story that reminds us that the different languages of humankind often have the power to divide people one from another. We know this from our own experiences, don't we? And not just foreign languages but the ways we understand one another and listen to one another. But the Spirit of God has rushed in to empower many different kinds of people to do something astounding: communicate effectively with one another. (Can you imagine such a thing?) Bridges were built and crossed in a moment, and the differences among them, instead of dividing, provided a startling illustration of just how great the power of God is. (You remember we talked about unity last week?) Those with hearts and minds that were open to the movement of the Spirit knew that a new day had come."

And perhaps that is what this story is really about, which is a story about a new day in the life of God's people. A new way of living in relationship with God. The Disciples are doing as Jesus did and are sharing the Good News of grace and forgiveness and reminding their sisters and brothers that the law of Love is stronger than the Law of condemnation. That the Spirit of Love is moving among all the people and while the words may be different the meaning and melody are the same. What an incredible moment that must have been for everyone!

It reminds me of something I discovered in our hymnal which you maybe didn't know. Did you know there are at least 50 hymns in the hymnal that can be sung to the tune we use for Amazing Grace? They are all set to different melodies, and all have different words, and if we spoke or sang them at the same time they would sound like the chaos of Pentecost. But if we sang them to this one tune all those words would be bound together by this melody of love. I like to think of Pentecost that way. That the Holy Spirit speaks to us all in different ways and maybe even different languages but the melody of God's love is the same.

And part of the challenge of the Pentecost story is that it is so dramatic. Flames as of fire, rushing wind, speaking in foreign languages, thousands of converts. You can easily come away from this story thinking to yourself that if you haven't had this same experience, then you haven't received the Holy Spirit and I think that would be a mistake.

We know from reading the Bible that the Spirit has been present throughout all the biblical narrative. The Spirit didn't just show up on Pentecost. We hear about the spirit from the very first chapter of Genesis where the wind, the spirit, blew across the waters when God was creating the earth. We can find the spirit moving through the Psalms and many other stories in the Bible both in the New and Old Testament. If we read the Bible from beginning to end we see that the Spirit of God is always creating. From the very beginning, God creates a beautiful world out of...nothing...out of chaos.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit God is always moving ahead. Still unfolding his creation and the Spirit is always associated with these new beginnings. You may remember some of these moments.

The Spirit visits Mary and a promise is given of a savior.
The Spirit descends on Jesus in the River and his ministry begins
The Spirit comforts and accompanies Jesus in the wilderness and a Messiah is defined.
The Spirit explodes within Paul on the road and a missionary is created.
The Spirit comes to Peter in a dream and a new world opens for him.
The Spirit is poured out and the church comes into being
The Spirit visits us and our lives are transformed. Do you remember?

But what is this transforming power that Luke describes? And what does it mean for us...For you...For me? The power that we are talking about is not the kind of power that we often think of. It is not political power or military power. It's not worldly power. The power of the Holy Spirit is the power that reflects the same kind of power that Jesus reflected and that power is revealed through service to others, community, unity, humility, surrender, faithfulness, and LOVE!

It is the power that is revealed by the gifts of the spirit that Paul so clearly tells us about in first Corinthians. Wisdom, teaching, faith, healing, and yes, (for my Pentecostal friends) speaking in tongues to name a few; all for the common good. But Love is the greatest of all these just as Jesus taught us, and his Spirit continues to teach us!

Amy Julia Becker in her blog at *Thin Places* shares her thoughts in this poem about the Holy Spirit. She says:

"In nudges and whispers. Like a seed growing, imperceptible at first.

Like wind, invisible, refreshing, transformative. Like water, cleansing, renewing, powerful. Unpredictably. Uncontrollably. Praying: for us, with us, in us, through us. Convicting, like a judge in a courtroom. Comforting, like a mother with a frightened child in the middle of the night. We know her work by experiencing it. She will not be pinned down, can only be described with analogies. But where there is forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation, grace, She leaves her fingerprints. Always the one connecting, making us into the body of Christ, God's hands in the world."

It is a power that gives us the courage to move forward in faith and to love what God loves. To speak boldly when necessary, to listen openly, to risk being a fool, to visit those in need, to study the word, to preach, to say yes when we would rather say no, to sing of God's faithfulness!

God through the power of the Holy Spirit continues to create out of nothing (look at us and what we are doing today!) And every day is Pentecost. Every day as a follower of Jesus, as a child of God, every day the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power to live a faithful life; to speak words of love and compassion; to dream dreams...to prophesy, to take to the wind and fly, to further God's kingdom of love here on earth as it is in heaven. But you have to be looking for it and be desiring to find it.

One of my favorite quotes about the Holy Spirit comes from Episcopal Priest and Author Barbara Brown Taylor and I love hearing it again. In her sermon on the Holy Spirit, she says, "There is some very fine teaching available on the Holy Spirit, and I hope none of you is satisfied with it. I hope none of you rests until you have felt the Holy Spirit blow through your own life, rearranging things, opening things up and maybe even setting your own head on fire. There is nothing you can do to make it happen, as far as I know, except to pray "Come Holy Spirit" every chance you get. If you don't want anything to change in your life, then for heaven's sake don't pray that! But if you are the type of person who likes to stand out on the porch when there is a storm moving through so you can feel the power that is pushing the trees around, then you are probably a good candidate for the Holy Spirit Prayer."

It seems to me that up until this moment the disciples didn't really understand what was going to happen to them. They didn't fully know who Jesus was, is and will be, and perhaps just like them, you and I, at one point in our lives, were also locked in an upper room...filled with a sense of emptiness, despair, questions, when suddenly we became aware of the Holy presence of God, the loving Presence of Jesus, the fullness of the Holy Spirit, that divine comforter and advocate. And we chose, like those early disciples, to surrender to God's invitation to be filled, to be restored, to let our dry bones come to life, to become new creations. And the joy of that experience began to fill us and overflow out into the world until even we could not keep silent! And so we, along with all those who have come before shout, "Come Holy Spirit, Come!" Let us pray,

Prayer

Holy Spirit, living breath of God, come upon us. Breathe new life into us. Help us to share this new life in all we do and say. Help us to be creative, as You are our Creator. Help us to inspire others, as You inspire us. Help us to be a new creation, for You have made us a new creation in You. Call us away from the competitive ways of the world and into the collaborative ways of the Spirit. Help us to build up rather than to break down, help us to be renewed and refreshed when we are worn down and tired. Call us into the way of New Life, through the gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.