

Pentecost Year A 2011

The story of the coming of the Holy Spirit in an almost visible form – a form that was perceived by the senses – is one of the most dramatic stories in the New Testament. Ten days have passed since the One who had filled their lives with meaning, then with unbearable sorrow and bewilderment at his death, to culminate in the supreme joy and surprise of resurrection, that One is no longer with them. He left them encouraged after his appearances, yes, but filled with longing for his actual presence. He also left them with a tender promise: “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you,” he said to them as recorded by John. “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high,” is recorded by Luke in his gospel.

Now, they are gathered together in one place, someone’s large house. Besides the eleven remaining disciples, there are others who followed Jesus through his years of ministry – the ones who never abandoned him. So obviously there are many women among them. They are all in a state of waiting: they know their Scriptures and this time they will not make a mistake – after the resurrection, they know that they must believe in the promises.

They are together and they are waiting, probably praying in total silence. And it is at that point that their

senses are invaded, assaulted: a violent wind makes a terrifying noise; those who have suffered through hurricanes and tornadoes know the sound. Fire that is seen rushing toward one is equally terrifying: they see it like a divided tongue burning on other people's heads.

But this time they are not afraid. They look at each other and they laugh with a delight that breaks forth in uncontrollable babbling. They pour out of the house because they have something to say – aloud, and in a manner understood by others, no matter what language they speak at home. It's a delirious moment. It cannot be contained. It must be shared; otherwise how can they possibly believe that they are not dreaming?

The streets fill with their sounds until strangers think them drunk. Peter, the man who had denied his best friend in the most critical moments of his life, that Peter, is unrecognizable now. He must be laughing as he says, "How can they be drunk at nine o'clock in the morning?" He is filled with words – the words of the prophets. He sees so many different kinds of people in front of him that he strives to address all of them. To the girls he says, "You will prophecy! You will preach through the Holy Spirit." To the young men he says, "You will see visions." And to the old whose eyes are clouded and who no longer see clearly he promises, "You shall dream dreams." These are the words of the prophet Joel, but Peter makes them his own knowing that they apply to the

crowd before him; he understands the meaning of “all flesh.”

The resurrected Christ is not a possession of some but a gift to all! The wondrous drama of the day continues with miracles: the miracle of language understood by all; the miracle of Peter’s ability to rise above his humble Galilean accent and upbringing; the miracle of hearts being touched and changed. What a dramatic day, that day of the coming of the Comforter, that day of understanding many languages.

By contrast, the teaching of Paul to the Corinthians on this gift of the Spirit is subdued. We go from the spectacular to the restrained. The day of Pentecost, full of drama and energy, was necessary for the beginning of the new age. But as is the habit of the human race, even good intentions are corrupted when we forget the common good in order to promote our own ego, our personal good alone.

The Corinthians, in this first century of the new life in Christ, are quarrelling about the gifts of the Spirit. Former pagans most of them, they remember ecstatic pagan rites and they are confusing them with the speaking in tongues, no matter that most of the time they are not making sense. Reasonably and quietly Paul cautions them that speaking in a tongue not understood by the listeners is of no value. Gifts, like laws, are corrupted. Jesus refused to keep the Sabbath if it meant

ignoring the needs of those who suffered and needed his healing. That law had been corrupted by those who kept the law at the expense of human beings. The gift of language is corrupted when we abuse it or when we claim it for our benefit even when no one else understands it. What good is human brilliance if it harms others instead of helping them?

To Paul, the manifestation, the presence and gifts of the Spirit, are as nothing if they are not used for the common good. He sees the Spirit as one and all-encompassing. He recognizes gifts of wisdom, knowledge, healing, faith, preaching, discernment, and interpretation as valid; but they must all work together, even when they are given to separate individuals, because we all belong to one body, that of the church, that of Christ.

How petty all our differences appear in the face of such conviction. To Paul, even the spectacular ability to perform miracles becomes as nothing when there is no love, he will write ... to the Corinthians... To Paul, also, divisions that move us away from drinking of one Spirit, are dangerous and destructive. The spectacular does not interest him when it comes to the communal good; it is like a clanging cymbal, he says. The working together as one body in Christ is of huge value to him.

In the years that follow, Paul will sacrifice his life to this end: teaching his churches that we are one in Christ.

He was not present on the day of Pentecost, but he is filled with the Holy Spirit who reveals all these things to him.

This then is the work of the Comforter, the one promised by Jesus to his disciples: the Comforter was with Paul and the Comforter is with us. So let us not lose heart if we don't have dramatic and miraculous events in our lives. Listen to how quietly Jesus gave the Spirit to his immediate friends in one of his post-resurrection appearances: "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

May we all feel his holy breath on us today. Amen.

By Katerina K. Whitley from Sermons that Work