

Pentecost 2009 B

Texts: Acts 2:1-21

Psalm 104:25-35, 37b

Romans 8:22-27

John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages.”

Acts: 2: 4

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your spirit, and we shall be created and you shall renew the face of the earth. Amen.

Happy Pentecost, or for those who have been around a very long time, Happy Whitsunday! Pentecost. Its meaning is fifty days. We are fifty days from Easter. Jesus had been crucified. He died and was buried and then raised up and returned to the Father.

The poor disciples. They found Jesus, lost Jesus, found Jesus again and now he is leaving them. What an emotional roller coaster to ride. I can just imagine their confusion, anger, and frustration at trying to understand all that had happened to them. As a result of following Jesus their lives were never the same. As a result of Jesus’ gift of the Holy Spirit to them they embark on a journey and mission that none of them could have foreseen. A journey and mission that literally made new the face of the earth.

The prayer I just prayed is known as the Prayer of the Holy Spirit. Many of you may know it from a Cursillo weekend or from being brought up in the Roman Catholic Church. We need to be very careful when we pray this prayer because it asks for nothing less than letting us experience the same amazing and terrifying event as those early disciples.

Last week I spoke about moving from being disciples to being apostles. The disciples couldn’t become apostles on their own. The disciples could only accomplish changing the world through the power of Jesus Christ.

They couldn’t accomplish it while he was here on earth, and so he sends them the very spirit of God. Because of the gift of the Holy Spirit this rag-tag bunch of followers, huddled in an upper room in abject fear,

were able to go out and become the witnesses of and for Jesus. The Holy Spirit gave them the power and courage to go out from that room and share all that had been shared with them. The Holy Spirit expanded the scope of their lives and love from the smallness of that room to encompass the entire world.

One theologian calls this experience of Pentecost as the “big bang” of the church. Through it the church, that community of faith and belief comes into being. Through it the disciples begin to understand God in new ways and to understand what it is that they are called to do. All the pieces are beginning to fall into place.

The Holy Spirit, the third part of the Trinity, does not exist separate from God and Jesus. It has been described by some theologians as the love that flows between Father and Son. What is amazing is that we are all invited to be a part of that love, to be what flows between the Creator and the Redeemer.

Our catechism defines the Holy Spirit as “God’s work in the world and in the Church even now.”¹ The Holy Spirit and the work it does always points back to God and Jesus, just as the work we do, through the power of the Spirit, points back to God and Jesus. It is by our work in the world that the same world comes to know God. We literally become the face of God to others, we invite them to also experience the love that flows between Father and Son.

I am constantly amazed and in awe of the fact the God wants me, wants us, to be a part of his mission, his work in this world. Think about that for a minute. God, the Creator of all, the Redeemer of all, the Sustainer of all that is, wants to use us and invites us to help renew the world.

Is there any work more joyful? Is there any work more necessary? Is there any work harder than renewing the world, the church, by bringing the Good News to others? I don’t think so. But as hard as it is and as scary as it is we are told we can do it. We are given assurance of this by the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our worship. We are given a reminder of this assurance every time we approach the altar to receive the body and blood of Jesus.

¹ BCP 1979 p. 852

Coming to communion makes us a community. Taking the body of Christ makes us the body of Christ.

I would like to read a story told by Sara Miles, in her book “Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion.” She writes of stumbling into a church, not knowing where she was going or why. Not knowing what she was doing or why. She wasn’t a person of great faith, in fact, she didn’t know whether she really believed in God at all, but one day she finds herself in a church, an Episcopal Church. There is a service going on, and, not knowing what she is doing she follows all those people going up front to receive communion. Her story of conversion is literally a story of Pentecost.

She writes: “Holy Communion knocked me upside down and forced me to deal with the impossible reality of God. Then, as conversion continued, relentlessly changing my assumptions about religion and politics and meaning, God forced me to deal with all kinds of other people. In large ways and small, I wrestled with Christianity: its grand promises and its petty demands, its temptation and hypocrisies, its ugly history and often insufferable adherents. Faith for me didn’t provide a set of easy answers or certainties: It raised more questions that I was ever comfortable with...I wound up not in what church people like to call ‘a community of believers...but in something huger and wilder than I had ever expected: the suffering, fractious, and unboundaried body of Christ...It may seem deluded to assert that people can still be fed with this ordinary yet mystical bread, so besmirched and exhausted and poisoned by centuries of religious practice, in ways that will change our own real lives, not to mention the world, for the better.

“But this is my belief: that at the heart of Christianity is a power that continues to speak and to transform us. As I found to my alarm, it could speak even to me: not in the sappy, Jesus-and-cookies tone of mild mannered liberal Christianity, or the blustering, blaming hellfire of the religious right. What I heard, and continue to hear, is a voice that can crack religious and political convictions open, that advocates for the least qualified, least official, least likely; that upsets the established order and makes a joke of certainty. It proclaims against reason that the hungry would be fed, that those that are cast down will be raised up, and that all things, including my own failures, are being made new. It offers food without exception to the worthy and the unworthy, the

screwed-up and the pious, and commands everyone to do the same. It doesn't promise to solve or erase suffering but to transform it, pledging that by loving one another, even through pain, we will find more life. And it insists that by opening ourselves to strangers, the despised or frightening or unintelligible other, we will see more and more of the holy, since, without exception, all people are one body: God's.

“This theology isn't mine alone. It comes from conversation with other believers, tradition, and scripture; books on prayer and liturgy. It comes, even more, from my year outside the church; from unbelieving and unbelievers, from doubt, from questions that still echo unanswered for me. Faith, for me, isn't an argument, a catechism, a philosophical proof. It is instead a lens, a way of experiencing life, and a willingness to act.”²

These are profound words. They are, I believe, words inspired by the Holy Spirit, that gift which inspires and urges us on to greater things than we could ever do on our own.

As a result of Sara Miles experience, as a result of being fed at God's table, she was led to act in the name of Jesus Christ. She started a homeless feeding program run at St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco that is one of the largest in the city. The sanctuary is open on Saturdays and the altar is cleared of everything, save the food that will be given away to the poor, homeless, downsized and desperate individuals that come to be fed, literally and spiritually.

Pentecost, the birthday of the Church and the day of new birth for a new humanity, and new world.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and we shall be created and you shall renew the face of the earth, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

² As found in Synthesis, Day of Pentecost-Culture May 31, 2009