

June 8, 2014

Pentecost

Acts 2: 1-21

John 20: 19-23

God's Inclusive Circle

Please be with me in prayer: May the Sacred Spirit that moved over the waters of Creation and called the world into being, may the Sacred Spirit that gave birth to a miracle in Mary's womb, may the Sacred Spirit that opened the Tomb and freed us all, may the Sacred Spirit that spoke the Church universal into being on Pentecost long ago, may that very self-same Sacred Spirit now come alive in our hearts and ignite an unquenchable flame of love for sharing, now and forevermore. Amen and amen.

Most of us are wary of this thing we call the Holy Spirit, so we look to symbols to explain what we can't comprehend.

The sign out front asks whether the Holy Spirit is a dove, cooing and peaceful and descending, symbolizing unity; or, as I've irreverently injected, whether it is a honking, noisy wild goose that interrupts and invades our comfort zone. The description in the second chapter of Acts also suggests the Holy Spirit is like a rushing wind, although the Hebrew

and the Greek speak more of the breath of God. Then, as the text also reminds us, there are those amazing and confusing “tongues of fire.”

Dove, wild goose, wind, breath, tongues of fire -- each symbol can be useful in its own way, but this morning I want to offer a much different image, that of an ever widening circle of inclusion. As humans we prefer to draw lines rather than circles. Lines, which ostensibly define boundaries, separate us from other people by pointing out our differences and by keeping others away from what is “ours.” When we draw lines, someone or something is always on the other side -- those aren’t our kind of people, or we don’t do things “that” way.

So this morning I want to invite you into the message of the circle; in a few moments I am going to ask you to step back, widen the circle of your faith, and step up and into the embrace of God’s ever expanding Holy Spirit. For now, though, just hold on to the the opening prayer on this day of Pentecost, this day when all our yesterdays, our present longings and experiences, and the deep desires of our hearts

for tomorrow are held together in God's time by the strength of this third being of the Trinity we call the Holy Spirit.

And just what is the Holy Spirit? Most Christians can grasp the idea of a Universal Creator who mysteriously called the world into being; and we can understand the idea that this same God was decisively present in the person and work of Jesus Christ -- that much is deeply embedded in the heart of our faith. But were it not for the work of the Holy Spirit, I wonder if all we would be left with is merely an intellectual belief system -- a "religion" if you will -- that only commemorates a person and events from long ago, offering little relevance for today.

In truth, it is the Holy Spirit who gives life to our faith, who frees us to become the people whom God intends us to be as co-agents of Creation. It is through sanctification by the Holy Spirit that we are made holy -- not in the sense of moral flawlessness or other worldliness, but in the sense of knowing "we are accepted" as imitators of Christ and, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "co-heirs" of the

kingdom to come. One of the saints on my shoulder, the late Dutch priest Henri Nouwen, says the gift of God's Holy Spirit means living in "the same communion" with God as Jesus did, and thus making God present in the world.

There is so much to talk about in this passage from the second chapter of Acts, but I just want us to focus on three sentences: *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.*

Later we learn that the Spirit fell upon all flesh and that 3,000 people were converted that day, that day being Pentecost which we traditionally celebrate as the birth of the Church universal. The important part of the story, however, is the inclusiveness of the language used – the fiery tongues, which symbolize universal understanding and clear communication, rested "on each of them" and

“all of them were filled” with the Holy Spirit. Luke, the author of Acts, didn’t say the Spirit fell upon only a chosen; we’re told it came to *everyone* – an important distinction for this divisive age we live in, especially in this country where immigrants are branded as aliens, where those who struggle to make ends meet are victimized by a “have and have-not” economy that worsens day by day, where fear of neighbor feeds on itself in random acts of violence that have become the “new normal,” and where those who love differently than the way society regards as acceptable are denigrated as somehow outside God’s love.

In the midst of today’s divisive reality, the voice from Acts, blown by the Holy Spirit into our 21st century community, challenges us to widen the circle. The poet Edwin Markham expressed the tension in American culture this way in his poem, “Outwitted:”

He drew a circle that shut me out

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle that took him in!

The practice of drawing ever larger circles of inclusion, where everyone counts or no one counts, has been called the “religion of the circle,” or a process that respects life in all its diversity, a practice that celebrates nature’s abundant web of relationships, and a set of principles that strives to build a human community of equals. Being “one in the Spirit,” as the song says, doesn’t mean uniformity – it means acceptance for who you are, regardless of your circumstance. In the ever widening circle of God’s Holy Spirit, which is available to everyone regardless of age, skin color, economic status or gender identity, the raw truth of Pentecost declares simply that love wins – for love draws the circle. Let me repeat that: **Love draws the circle!**

In Acts 2, we see a *BIG* God with a *BIG* word at work expanding into a *BIG* world.

I say all of this because I believe the first century church is speaking to not only the 21st century Church universal, but to our church, St. John, specifically. Whether you realize it or not, we – you and I – are living in a time of huge societal change, and the Spirit of our still-speaking God is calling us to remember how God spoke to the early church in a time of polarization not unlike today. Just as God was doing a new thing then, God is doing a new thing now in challenging churches and communities across our country, even around the world, to live out the Gospel in ways that could not possibly been imagined 2,000 years ago. The Spirit of our still-speaking God, which we celebrate this day, calls us to interpret eternal truths in new ways.

Nowhere is the challenge more apparent than in the way we see old normative behavior regarding marriage changing, even as we speak. Same gender marriage is now the law in nearly half the states, including Illinois just this week, and the legal canopy of equal rights protection is proceeding at a pace that could not have been imagined a decade ago. But despite the breath-taking pace, acceptance of same gender

marriages has been met with deeply rooted political opposition and spiritual resistance in many parts of the country. Many churches and national denominations have been torn apart over this issue, the most recent being a schism that threatens to break the United Methodist Church into two separate bodies.

Fully aware of the troublesome history on this subject within St. John, I stepped into this swirling climate of change yesterday when I officiated at the wedding of two Fairview Heights men right here in this sanctuary. If I ever entertained any hesitation about what I was doing, those qualms were wiped away as the mother of one took my hand in hers, and through her tears said, "Thank you for blessing these boys."

I have been asked to participate in two other same-sex marriages in July, both of which will be held at St. John. I have done this, and am doing this, because I believe my understanding of my vocation as a called and ordained minister of the Church of Jesus Christ does not allow me the option to say no. But my "yes" does not mean your "yes"

as the members of the Body of Christ known as St. John. Your “yes” or even your “no” is entirely your “yes” and your “no.”

However, before we ever get to that point of discernment, perhaps a year or more from now, my intention today is to invite you to participate in a process of open hearts and open minds seeking the will of God for God’s people. I know many will say the Bible is perfectly clear on the subject of same-sex relationships. It is not. As a working journalist of more than three decades, someone who made his living sorting on conflicting facts, and as a student of the Gospel for the past seven years and your pastor for now almost three years, I can tell you with absolute certainty that this is not a simple question.

Believe me, I know this is an unsettling topic for some who will wonder why we even have to begin such a conversation; others will too quickly say that welcoming of gay and lesbian brothers and sisters is long overdue. My friends, this is not a win-lose debate, about one view overcoming or changing another; the real spiritual issue is about trusting God enough to openly share deeply held views and beliefs with

one another and learning by the grace of God to live with those differences while still focused on the center of our faith, who is Jesus Christ.

Real people of God do not shy away from the tough questions of life, and they constantly challenge themselves with questions, such as how do I know whether what I'm thinking is the voice of God within me or the pressure of the outside world upon me. These are the holy conversations of life in the faith, and it is the conversations that are overdue – not the conclusions.

I will explain in a little more detail what I'm asking you to do when we get to our congregational meeting right after worship, and you will have plenty of opportunity to ask me questions. All I ask for now is that we follow this simple premise: if we believe what we say we believe, that is, that the Holy Spirit of God is alive and well within each heart, and calling us to discernment of God's will for the greater body of St. John, then we cannot fear or doubt the outcome, for God is ever present.

To that end, we will close with a familiar hymn, “Breathe on Me, Breath of God.” As you stand to sing, open your heart to the words expressed and let them be the beginning of a holy conversation here at St. John. May our prayer be: Come, Holy Spirit, and bring us to your shalom.

Amen.