

Pentecost, Yr. A

June 4, 2017

Acts 2:1-21; 1 Cor. 12:3b-13; John 20: 19-23

We've all heard Pentecost referred to as the birthday of the Church. And these scriptures are perfectly chosen to show us where the church came from, what we're supposed to be about, where we're headed and how we're supposed to get there. So, in the time we have, which will be, I'm afraid, all too brief, I'd like us to look at the Holy Spirit – who and what are we talking about when we say “the Holy Spirit”; the idea of power itself and how it relates to the church and the church's mission; the vision that informs our choices as church and followers of Christ and, finally, the gifts we've been blessed with and our obligation to use them for the common good.

First, the Holy Spirit. You'll all remember the Star Wars movies and the phrase, “May the Force be with You!” When asked about that phrase, George Lucas said that he “put the Force into the movie in order to try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people – more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system. I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery.” And he did that, with stunning success. We all get the idea of the Force, I think. And it's a helpful stepping stone to thinking about the Holy Spirit. More theologically than Lucas, Hans Kung says that the early Christians wrestled with what language to use to say that God and Jesus are wholly present, here and now, real and effective. In the Bible, “spirit” is a force or power proceeding from God, and also God present and active in human history and in the life of each person. In the Acts reading, perhaps it's POWER that grabs our attention – wind, fire, speaking in tongues, visions. In the Deacon's school, we're using a text by Luke Timothy Johnson whose central thesis is that the first Christians had an experience of power and this reading certainly bears that out. During a recent class, I asked the participants if they thought church goes still had that experience of power and every single one of them said NO. And that got me thinking about power – what it is, what it's for. At its most basic, power is the ability to get something done – to make some kind of change. When we read Acts, it's about power with fireworks; it's about those timid disciples locked in a room suddenly breaking free of fear and going out into the world with the message of Jesus. It's pretty spectacular. There's a story about an elderly nun, the Mother Superior of her order, who was dying. The other nuns had gathered around her and were trying to make her comfortable. They gave her some warm milk to drink, but she refused it. Then one nun took the glass back to the kitchen and added a healthy dose of some whiskey she had received as a Christmas gift. The Mother superior took a small sip, then a bit more and then finished the whole glass. The nuns gathered around her asked her for some words of wisdom before she died. She raised herself up in the bed, pointed out the window and said, “Don't sell that cow!” To make the theological connection, we'd have to say that the “warm milk” of the Gospel has little flavor and no power to animate our lives, but then, if you add the Holy Spirit, you get something entirely different. One Orthodox writer put it this way:

“Without the Holy Spirit, God is far away, Christ stays in the past, the Gospel is a dead letter, the Church is simply an organization, authority is a matter of domination, mission a matter of propaganda...but in the Holy Spirit, the cosmos is resurrected and groans with the birth pangs

of the Kingdom, the risen Christ is there, the Gospel is the power of life...and human action is deified.”

Add the Holy Spirit and everything changes.

But it isn't just about spectacular stuff. Stop a minute and take a look at that first sentence in the Corinthians reading: in that sentence and elsewhere in his writings, Paul takes the position that even the ability to believe is a result of the action of the Holy Spirit. **NO ONE CAN SAY, "JESUS IS LORD" EXCEPT BY THE HOLY SPIRIT.** So, you and I are here this morning, because we've been empowered by the Holy Spirit to come to faith, to come to that understanding that Jesus is Lord.

Jesus is Lord. What are we saying when we say that? The first Christians were saying that if Jesus is Lord, it means that Caesar ISN'T. That was a courageous statement in a world where pretty much everything was controlled by Caesar. The counterpart today? To say that Jesus is Lord is to say that Jesus and his vision of the world are what control my life – it shapes my thinking, my understanding, my actions. Jesus: not politics, not the stock market, not the economy not my career. Jesus.

Sounds OK, right? So let's unpack that a bit. In the Acts reading, Peter talks about the visions and dreams people would have. Jesus' vision, his dream and therefore ours, was about the coming of the kingdom, about that state of affairs that would exist when God's will was finally being realized here on earth as it is in heaven. It's about that new creation inaugurated by his death and resurrection. And here, let's look for a minute at the John reading. This is the resurrected, the newly alive Jesus, appearing to the disciples. He does three things. First he says "peace be with you." One person has said that if he were Jesus, given how the disciples had acted over the past couple of weeks, instead of "peace" he would have said, "separate checks, please." But he doesn't – no words of recrimination or judgment, just PEACE. And then John says that he breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit." Unlike Acts, no fireworks, but a quiet breath, reminiscent of that first breath God breathed into the first humans. Because this is the new creation and these people are the first children of God alive in this new world. And then he sends them: As the Father sent me, so I send you.

And that leads to the next question. Sent to do what? Nothing more and nothing less than to live out the implications of saying "Jesus Is Lord". To live as Jesus did. We know the outlines of his life – always being about blessing and healing and forgiveness. And here it's helpful to bounce back to Paul's reading. Apparently, his all-too-human folks in Corinth were competing over their spiritual gifts. Yes, Paul says, you all have gifts; in fact the community has all the gifts it needs to live out Christ-like lives. BUT, he says, the gifts are different – and there's no ranking them and equally important, there's no using them for yourself. You have them; they've been GIVEN to you by God and they're all to be used for the common good. This is hard for us, I think, because we live in such an individualistic society. I remember mentioning the common good in a sermon once and someone said, "Well, who gets to say what the common good is?" I suppose that's a fair question but we have only to look back at Jesus and his vision of the Kingdom to find the answer. The common good is that state of affairs in which each and every person is recognized as a son or daughter of God and treated accordingly.

I'd like to mention here a sermon that Gwynne preached a couple of weeks ago at the UU Fellowship. It was an expansion of the course that she and Roger did for The Clearing this past spring on central Hebrew concepts. She pointed out that the Hebrews were a small nation surrounded by mighty and warlike powers and they were able to stay alive as a community because of three crucial concepts embedded in their understanding of who they were and what they were to be about. The three were truth, righteousness and justice. Truth, not as we see it today, with the oxymoronic idea of "alternative facts" or whatever I choose to believe because my opinion is as good as anyone else's. No, it was truth as reality, as the way things really are – no spin, no obfuscation. Truth for them was embedded in God's creation; it was part of the very structure of the universe. So, no matter how sincerely you believed otherwise, if you dropped an apple, gravity meant that it would hit the ground. Righteousness, not as a kind of smugness, but instead as a duty to foster right relationships between you and God and you and your fellow human beings. And justice, not as claiming my legal rights over and against you, but as the kind of society where everyone was cared for and everyone's needs were met. Those three things guaranteed the well-being, first of the community, and then of each and every individual within that community. (Gwynne's given me permission to re-print that sermon in the next newsletter; well-worth reading.)

It can be difficult if not impossible to look at our world today and see even the beginnings of God's kingdom. But we can take heart – the Holy Spirit is alive and well and dwelling within each of us. We know where we're headed; we know the game plan; we have the strength and guidance we need. Whatever your gift, take it and use it for God's purposes.

I'd like to end with one of my favorite stories, which I'm sure I've shared with you before. It's about a desert monk who went to see one of the desert fathers for counsel. He told him that he had been, in the most faithful way possible, trying to live a holy life. He had prayed, fasted, given alms. And now, he wondered, what was the next step? The story goes that the elder monk lifted his hands in the air and the tip of each finger was aflame. "Why not," he said, "why not become fire?" And as for us: why not, indeed?

Amen.