

Pentecost, Yr. A

May 31, 2020

Acts 2: 1-21, 1 Cor. 12:3b-13

Pentecost is full of themes for us to look at, but there are two I'd like to concentrate on. The first is the call to transformation – to the kind of change that's possible when people are filled with the Holy Spirit and the second, because Pentecost is thought of as the birthday of the church, is for us to think about what church is, what it's supposed to be and do and how we fit in.

We all know the story that is told in Acts about the spirit descending upon the disciples in that upper room. It's a powerful story. The power certainly comes through in the English – great winds, tongues of fire, disciples speaking in different languages and understood by all. I don't know Greek, but I understand that, in the Greek, it's even more powerful. Apparently there, one gets the full sense of a fear-inducing, adrenalin-pumping, wind-tossed, fire-singeing, smoke-filled turmoil.

Thomas Long, a great preacher and Bible scholar tells a story about attending a service when his family was quite young. When the part about a great wind blowing was read, someone in the choir turned on a tape recorder at top volume with the sounds of a

hurricane wind. He said his kids, who had been lazily coloring in the bulletins, snapped to attention and began looking around the sanctuary. When the minister read the part about the tongues of fire, people planted in the congregation pulled out little red flashy pom-poms and waved them above their heads. And, as you might guess, when they got to the part about speaking in different languages, some people stood and began speaking in their native tongues. He said that, at this point, his kids were practically standing in the pew. When the minister finished reading the passage, the choir began to sing “Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew,” and they all settled down to listen to the sermon. But suddenly a man in the balcony stood up and laughed rudely, yelling, “They must be drunk on new wine!” Long said his children were, by this time almost beside themselves with excitement. When they left worship that day, his little boy turned to him and said, “Wow, Dad! That was really church!” We’ll come back to that “really church” line in a bit. First, though, I’d like us to just think about the Holy Spirit.

When I was growing up, and this is probably true for most of us, this third person of the Trinity was called the Holy Ghost. That led to some confusion, I think. But perhaps we need to think about what we mean

when we say the Holy Spirit as well. One preacher said that he thought most Episcopalians think that the Holy Spirit is some sort of ecclesiastical gas floating around. Maybe not quite that bad, but still it won't hurt to think more deeply about this. We're all clear about what's meant when we use the word "spirit" in other contexts: for instance, the spirit of Christmas. It's the animating principle of something or someone. It's their essential vision. So, for instance we know some people who have a spirit of generosity, others have a spirit of greed. Or think of those that operate out of a spirit of forgiveness contrasted with those who come with a spirit of vengeance. We're talking here about the Spirit of God, which was the spirit that animated Jesus. Since it IS the Spirit of God, it appears in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Hebrew Scriptures, it's the spirit that hovers over the creation and brings Israel back to life in the story of the dry bones we heard in Ezekiel. In the New Testament, the spirit is present at Jesus' baptism, guides him into the desert where he comes to understand his call. The spirit is present throughout Jesus ministry. It's present in this Acts reading surely, but also later, when Peter is able to enlarge his vision to include Cornelius and his household and Paul when he preaches to the Gentiles. The message is that that same spirit that animated and guided

Christ is now in his living body, the church, and indeed in all those who follow Christ, who are animated by that same spirit of goodness, loving kindness, inclusion, compassion and love.

The second thing to think about is that Pentecost is seen as the beginning, the birthday of the church. I saw a cartoon recently, at the start of the pandemic which showed a church building and a sign – the sign said: the building is closed, but the church is open. We're experiencing that first hand. The building is great – it's wonderful to have a place to gather for worship and fellowship, but the church is so much more than that. It's that beloved community where we worship, where we support and care for one another, where we learn who we are and what we are meant to do, where we can learn how to exercise our gifts for ministry to the wider world. It's that community which leads us toward the kind of transformation the disciples experienced as it. It does that by leading us into the heart and mind of God and by allowing us first to say, as Paul said in this morning's reading, that **JESUS IS LORD and then to understand the implications of that statement. To say Jesus is Lord is to say that God's vision of loving-kindness for everyone and everything is primary and to say that is also to say that the contrary values of the world –**

domination, blindness, cruelty, greed, selfishness – are, quite simply, wrong. God’s spirit, as articulated in the Acts and Corinthian readings, will result in understanding and transformation as we change to get our lives in line with God’s will for us and for the world. Church is meant to be that community where we support one another, where we freely share the gifts that we each have been given as we accompany one another on that journey to transformation.

I’ve used that word transformation a lot. We all know what it means: change. Not just any change but, as I said early, change so that, more and more, we come to put on the mind of Christ, and live out of God’s spirit. Change can be pretty challenging and, quite frankly, if things are working for me right now, it’s tempting to resist change. But perhaps we’ve been given an opportunity during this recent crisis to grow a bit. What has been uncovered during this period is the fact that there is a lot of inequality and suffering in this country has been unseen. The key word there is UNSEEN. But now it’s been laid bare and we can all see the need to change, we can see and recognize it because we know that God’s intent is that everyone is able to live a flourishing life. And what comes after the knowing and the seeing, is the acting.

I think it's probably easy for us to look at the needs of the world and to say, "You know, I'm just too old and tired to do anything about that." And perhaps none of us is going to be called to do anything heroic. But I would like to suggest that any small loving act or word or gesture lights a candle in this often dark world and who's to say that that one candle isn't just as powerful in some kind of cosmic calculus as deeds that seem much more grand. And there are grand deeds being done and they should be celebrated. Like the fellow in Kentucky who bought the inventory of a K-Mart that was closing. It was to be a business proposition but, upon reflection, he decided the poor needed those things more than he did, so he gave it all away. But on the other end of the scale, I'd like to tell two short stories. The first is told by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross who, while she was doing research for her work on death and dying, noticed a pattern of calm and tranquility among certain of the patients. It turned out that they all had the same orderly who, when asked what he was doing, said, "Nothing special. I just talk with them. You know, I had two babies die on my lap, but God never abandoned me. I tell them that. I tell them that they aren't alone, that God is with them and that they don't have to be afraid." One more: Some of you may have read Stephen Carter's books. He's a law professor at

Harvard. But when he was 12, his family, which is black, moved into a white neighborhood. He and his siblings sat on the front porch but passers-by didn't acknowledge them in any way. He was convinced that the move had been a huge mistake – they wouldn't be accepted, they would be ostracized. But then, a woman pulled into the driveway across the street. She waved when she got out of her car and went into her house. But after a bit, she came out and came across the street carrying a tray of drinks and cream cheese and jelly sandwiches. He talks about the fact that that simple gesture changed his life. In one of his books he recalls that day and says that he can still close his eyes and remember those sandwiches on a summer afternoon when I discovered how a single act of genuine and unassuming (loving-kindness) can change a life forever. Knowing what God wants of us, seeing where there is need and then acting.

A note here to say that the Sojourners group has set aside this coming Monday, June 1st as a time of prayer and remembrance for the 100,000 people who have died in the pandemic. The day is being observed around the country and across religions. It's one more candle that can be lighted as we join together to mourn our brothers and sisters who have been lost.

One more way to recognize our connection and our loss. Amen.