

Pentecost May 23, 2010 John A. Baldwin

This morning is the Day of Pentecost, the day on which the disciples of Jesus received the Holy Spirit in the form of tongues of fire resting upon each of them. The liturgical color of the day is red (for the flames of fire) as may be seen in the hangings on the altar, in the stoles Marguerite and I are wearing, and in the shirts and dresses many of you are wearing this morning. There is only one other Sunday when the liturgical color is red, Palm Sunday, where red symbolizes the blood that Jesus is about to shed on Good Friday.

Pentecost is one of 4 major days in the Christian year along with Easter, Christmas and Trinity Sunday (which is next week). As Episcopalians we are Trinitarians. At the heart of our theology, as expressed in the Nicene Creed, is the understanding that our one God has three persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit....Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier....distinct from one another, yet intimately bound up as one. On Easter we focus on the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, who is raised from death to life, and through his Resurrection points to the promise of everlasting life. On Christmas we focus on the first person of the Trinity, God the Creator of all that is, who in the form of an infant enters fully into human flesh, becoming one with all of us. On Pentecost, we focus on the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, God's ongoing presence in the world. And next Sunday (Trinity Sunday) we bring all of this theology together....one God in three persons.

Now it's not my intention that this sermon be a profound, theological exploration of spiritual mysteries that have challenged all but the most astute intellectual minds. Perhaps I'll try my hand at this next week....or NOT. Today I want to focus on the importance of the Holy Spirit in our lives today.

Interestingly, our opening scripture reading this morning comes from a story in the Book of Genesis about the so-called Tower of Babel. It's a story about pride and arrogance, in which an ancient people decide to build a tower into the heavens. Just as in the story of the Garden to Eden, God sets limits on human hubris...the desire to become or play God. In the Garden story, a sentry (cherubim) with a flaming sword is posted to block the way to the Tree of Life. In this story, the language of the people is confused so that they can no longer communicate freely and easily, and hence are unable to cooperate in building this Tower of Pride.

The story about receiving the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost dovetails with the story about the Tower of Babel. Something very different happens here, however. In effect, Pentecost reverses Babel. Instead of a confusion of languages, there is a uniting of languages. Parthians and Medes can understand Elamites and Cappadocians. The Holy Spirit unites what has previously been divided. There is a coming together that fills everyone with awe and wonder.

The Day of Pentecost, in reversing Babel, reminds us that the Holy Spirit yearns, aches, deeply desires the coming together of the peoples of the world. As the disciples are scratching their heads in wonderment as the Holy Spirit fills those present in the room, Peter observes, "This is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." What a glorious vision - God's Spirit available to all, men and women, filled with visions and dreams.

What happened? Why are there so many divisions within the Body of Christ, the Church? Why do we get into such a lather that people cease being able to communicate with one another? We do well to ponder this story in a world where there is an increasing confusion of tongues. The willingness to engage in civil discourse, so as to understand another's point of view and frame of reference, is becoming increasingly difficult. Christians and Moslems demonize one another, so too do fundamentalists and Main Line Protestants. Republicans and Democrats seem hardly able to converse with one another in Congress. People of like minds and political persuasions flock together and shut down their willingness to listen with compassion and empathy to those with different mindsets.

When I began my ministry in Grand Rapids, Michigan I was very surprised to see so many Christian Reform churches (the pre-dominant denomination in that city) in such close proximity to one another, with the Fifth Christian Reform Church across the street from the Fourth, and the Sixth two blocks away. "What's going on here?" I asked someone. "Oh, members of the Fourth got angry with the pastor over some point of theology and left to form the Fifth Christian Reformed church, and a few years later, the same thing happened at the Fifth." Churches formed in anger usually splinter again over time. Is this the Holy Spirit in action? The same has happened in our own denomination in disagreements over the priesthood of

women, the adoption of a new prayer book, and consent to the consecration of Gene Robinson, a gay man in a partnered relationship, as Bishop of New Hampshire. In Pittsburgh, where I attended a conference two weeks ago, a whole diocese is split down the middle with 27 parishes still part of the Episcopal Church and the others part of the Anglican Diocese of North America. Is this the Holy Spirit in action?

All spirits are not of God. At times it takes careful discernment to distinguish what is holy, authentic & life-giving from what is not. Ugly passions can be raised & manipulated by self-righteousness, rigidity, dogma, anger and fear. In what has been one of the most important passages of scripture in my faith formation (Galatians 5), St. Paul provides us with a process for discerning what is of the Holy Spirit & what is not, in his articulation of the Fruits of the Spirit and the Works of the Flesh. The fruits of the Spirit, fully present on the Day of Pentecost are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness & self-control. The works of the flesh include immorality, idolatry, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, and the like. The Fruits of the Spirit flow from the heart of God, while the Works of the Flesh are notable by God's absence.

I think it's a very good thing, every so often to reflect on how we're doing in embodying the Fruits of the Spirit and resisting the Works of the Flesh. For example, in reflecting on the Fruits of the Spirit in your life: Do you reach out to others in a loving manner? Are you as concerned about your "neighbor" as you are about yourself? Is the Holy Spirit producing joy in your heart that spills into the life you live? Is your life filled with peace in spite of your circumstances? Are you calm in the midst of stress? Do you accept interruptions and delays gracefully? Can you take on long-term projects and commitments that don't bring immediate gratification? How kind are you to strangers? Are you sensitive to the needs of others? Are you living a life that honors God and seeks to carry out His will in the world? Are you a person of your word? Do you give your commitments 100%? Are you quick to listen, and slow to act and speak? Do you have control of your anger? Are you healthily assertive yet non-aggressive in your relationships? Are you humble in your approach? Are you free from addictions and uncontrollable behavior? If you can answer "yes" to all of these then the Holy Spirit is richly abundant in your life. If not, you're much like me....still lots of Holy Spirit work left to do.

Another measure, according to Paul, in how well we are embodying the Holy Spirit in our lives is to examine the Works of the Flesh operative within us. Do you have a hard time holding yourself back from saying hurtful things to others? Do you have a hard time forgiving? Do you have difficulty celebrating the success of others? Are you holding grudges against someone? Do you regularly think about yourself, your needs, wishes or desires, before you consider how others might feel? Is it important that you get your way when someone else has a different need? Are you a grumbler/complainer? Do you join cliques, or form friendships that exclude others? Do you have difficulty doing things in moderation? Are you faithful to one boyfriend/girlfriend/spouse or partner? Do you see sexuality as a gift to be nurtured, or as a way of meeting physical desires? Are material things more important to you than relationships with others and with God? Do you engage in magical thinking or superstitions? If you can answer "yes" to some of these, then there is still lots of Holy Spirit work left to do.

The Day of Pentecost is a day to be thankful that God's Holy Spirit is alive and active in the world, but also a day to take stock of how it is impacting our own life and the lives of those around us in our church, our workplace, our community, the world. Amen.