

“Baptized With the Holy Spirit”

Mark 1:4-11

Richard C. Allen

January 11, 2009

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

The journey towards ordination is both electrifying and terrifying; it is both joyful and fearful. The most dreaded moment comes at the ecclesiastical council where the candidate reads his or her ordination paper, defends it by fielding all the questions brilliantly, and then steps into the outside hall to await the vote of the gathered delegates. For many years, these ecclesiastical councils were attended faithfully by the Rev. Newell Curtis, then pastor at Manchester Center Church. Inevitably, he would wait until all the other questions had been asked, and then he would raise his hand, “Tell us what you know about the Holy Spirit.” And the candidate would swallow hard and reveal what is often the case, that we tend to know a lot about God the Creator and even more about Jesus the Redeemer, but our understanding of the Holy Spirit is less sophisticated, less developed, perhaps even less valued.

Moments after beginning this sermon on Tuesday morning, one of our members handed me a worship bulletin from a UCC congregation in Massachusetts where she had visited last Sunday. I read the part where they welcome everyone. It says, “In the name of God and Jesus Christ, the XXX church welcomes....” I just found it odd that they edited the Holy Spirit out of the Trinitarian greeting!

Because the text for today takes us to John the Baptist saying, ‘One who is greater than I will baptize you with the Holy Spirit’, I thought I would open up some dialogue on this third person of the Trinity.

For me, the Holy Spirit is the aspect of God that empowers me to see things in new ways, to see things, finally, as God would have me see them. Especially in John's Gospel, we find many healing narratives where blind people receive their sight. John, of course, would have us think metaphorically about receiving one's sight. My dad was fond of using the expression, "Ah, I see, said the blind man." He would recite that refrain whenever someone in the family came to a moment of clarity.

So when the Baptizer told the crowds out by the Jordan River that he was only baptizing with water, but that One greater than he would baptize with the Holy Spirit, he was making a very hopeful pronouncement, that those who had not yet come to see as God sees would one day find that their eyes had been opened!

One of the truths that many in John's day had not yet seen is that life is sacred in all its forms. All of humanity is sacred. The Holy Spirit's work is to open the eyes of the world to see this truth. And what a blessed day it is when the eyes of the blind are opened at last!

Jesus was born into a world where children were often not seen as sacred creations. The disciples saw them as a nuisance. King Herod sentenced all the male children to be eliminated. Girls were considered the property of their fathers until they became the property of their husbands. There were no child labor laws, no safe church initiatives, no justice afforded to children. The work of the Holy Spirit is to change that attitude. The work of the Holy Spirit is to open the eyes of every culture on the face of the earth to the sacredness of each child's life.

Like you, I've been watching with deep sorrow the escalating violence in the Gaza strip. Adults are lobbing bombs at each other and it is school children who are losing their arms and their legs and their lives. Israelis and Palestinians and Hamas all claim to be in the right, all claim to be acting from positions of righteousness; yet, once again it is the children who are suffering; it is the children who are considered less than sacred. So, when I pray, my prayer sounds like this:

Come Holy Spirit, Come! Come to open the eyes of the blind. Come to empower adults on the west bank and the east bank to see what they have not yet seen: that the children on the other side of the fence are also sacred creatures, made in the image of God, deserving a chance to live into the fullness of their humanity.

It is impossible for me to take the side of Israel or of Palestine. I stand, instead, with the children! My constant prayer is that the whole world will be baptized with the Holy Spirit, that the world will see as God sees, that the world will see that the children are the future, that the children are our teachers, that the children are too sacred to be treated as pawns in a battle for land.

This piece of land over here may be yours, and this piece may be mine; but the children...the children are OURS!

I opened this dialogue by saying that for me the Holy Spirit is the aspect of God that empowers me to see in a new way, to see as God would have me see. The stories that are most moving to me are the ones where the story teller can't help but to break out into singing,

“Amazing grace how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now I'm found;
was blind, but now I see.”

When I first moved to rural South Dakota, I wasn't sure whether I could thrive there or not. Life on a Sioux reservation was still a mystery to me. It's a strange reservation in that the land was opened up for Homesteading in 1910 bringing white settlers from Minnesota and Nebraska. So, to this day, there in Ziebach County we find the descendants of Swedes and Norwegians with names such as Sven and Ole living side by side with the descendants of Lakota and Ogalala chiefs with names such as Uses the Knife and Deer with Horns.

Cliff Birkeland told me this story on himself in 1975. So I consider it to be tell able from the pulpit. I believe he wouldn't mind, though he has been dead now about ten years. Cliff told me that he had always imagined his son, John, would go off to college, meet a blue-eyed, blond-haired Norwegian woman, and bring her home to set up housekeeping on the family ranch. Part of Cliff's vision did come to pass. John did go to college. But the woman he brought home looked like no woman who ever lived in Oslo or Stockholm. Rita LaPlant, a nearly full-blooded Lakota woman from White Horse, South Dakota became Cliff's daughter-in-law. Cliff told me it was many months, maybe years, before the shock of it wore off. He said he finally decided to get to know her. Then, as he told me the story, he got this huge Norwegian grin on his face and he said, 'I got to know her all right; I got to love her!'

That was Cliff Birkeland's story of having his eyes opened! It was his story of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit got a hold of him and opened his eyes for good! Rita and John became the Godparents of our first-born child. I think of that dear family now as evidence of the Holy Spirit's power to open our eyes to see as God sees.

I hope a dialogue can continue on this subject. Perhaps over coffee, perhaps at a board of deacon's meeting, perhaps on a youth mission trip, perhaps in the aisles of the grocery store; I hope we can explore together how it is that we have been baptized with the Holy Spirit, how it is that we have come to see as God sees. In the greatest of hope, Amen!