

“Day of the Red Spirit”

John 20: 19-23, Acts 2: 1-21

Pentecost/A, May 11, 2008

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I want to begin this morning with a story. There once was a church whose pastor of long standing retired. Now they were in search of a new one. They did their good-byes well by the former pastor, serving up a \$10 a plate dinner in the church social hall to add to his retirement fund. They gleefully sang “For He’s A Jolly Good Fellow” and told nice stories about him. They gave him a new fly rod and reel with instructions on how to get lost in the wilderness. And off he went into his retirement.

Then the members invoked section 6.4.13 of their by-laws and started the process to look for a new leader. The first meeting of the new senior minister’s search committee met in the “Fellowship Room” one evening soon after the minister’s departure. It was chaired by an enthusiastic woman who impressed upon the group that what they had agreed to do was not going to be a picnic. In looking for a new minister they were charting their church’s destiny. God was depending on them to put all other agendas in their lives secondary to this God-given task; (sounds like the pep talk we might soon give to the Capitol Campaign Committee), and heaven help them if they didn’t rise to the occasion. She did such a superb job that four members of the committee resigned on the spot. So madam chairperson backpedaled. What she really meant to say was that she hoped they would do their best by the great employment officer in the sky. The fainthearted stayed on to consider the next item on the agenda, “What do you want in a new minister?”

There was splendid participation at that point. Every person spoke with a voice of authority and the scribe for the meeting noted all their points on a flipchart until an image began to emerge. Then they all agreed to some modifications since neither Moses nor Jesus was available for the call. Soon it was time for lemonade and cookies and, while refreshing themselves for the task at hand, some started talking about their former minister. “You know, after all is said and done he really was a pretty good guy. But we took advantage of him. We let him do way too much. Whenever things needed doing, we left it up to him.”

One by one the others voiced similar sentiments. And it was as if the heavens opened. Suddenly it came to them that they would never ever expect everything to come from their minister again. They would take their responsibility more seriously from now on and do their part in giving directions to their church. And the more they thought about it, the warmer their hearts became not only toward their old minister but to one another as well. And the more they talked about it, the hotter their enthusiasm became until their voices became like a rush of mighty wind filling the room.

Word of this great moment quickly spread to their entire congregation and there was a great and most spontaneous “Amen!” to this new spirit. “Find us a minister and things will be different this time,” everyone said. And the search began.

Now, it was shortly after this that a group of concerned citizens asked the church to join a movement to ask for an international inquiry into the Pentagon's treatment of detainees at Guantanamo Bay. It was a matter of justice they said, human rights, and they thought the church would naturally have something to say about that. So the church held a meeting about it and discussed the controversial matter at great length. Then someone said, "let's table the matter for now until the new minister gets here. Let him or her decide."¹

We smirk or perhaps even chuckle at how truthful this little story sounds. However, what does it have to do with Pentecost? There were many amazing things that happened that Pentecostal day so long ago. We may wonder about the speaking in tongues or the rush of the mighty wind or the fact that despite whatever language people were speaking, everyone could be understood. What strikes me about what happened at Pentecost is how inclusive it was. This was not one of those "Jesus took a few disciples off to pray," situations. The Holy Spirit rested upon everyone who was gathered together, people from many nations. It was a radically inclusive event. It was an amazingly public event.

Pentecost means 50 and the people had gathered in Jerusalem fifty days after Passover to celebrate "the feast of weeks" or Shavuot. This festival celebrates the "first fruits" of the early harvest in spring. Suddenly, we read, a sound like the rush of a violent wind came, and filled their gathering place, and they received the Holy Spirit. They began to speak the gospel message in a way that everyone could understand, no matter what their native language. Those who were not part of the celebration spoke skeptically about what they observed. Some even suggested that this was nothing more than drunken jabbering. After all, there were rumors about what those Jesus followers did together. Then Peter of all people set the record straight. He insisted that no one was drunk, but rather, they were speaking as the prophets spoke. They would fulfill the words of the prophet Joel who declared long ago that their young ones would see visions and their old men would one day dream dreams.

Today we celebrate Pentecost as the day when the Holy Spirit gave birth to the church. After the Spirit infiltrates the crowd and Peter proclaims the words of the prophet, he goes on to preach a short sermon. The story goes on to say that after Peter preached, more than 3,000 were baptized. That's an awesome way to begin the church! Short and sweet and 3000 people became disciples. Perhaps we preachers have something to learn from our brother Peter!

Before his death Jesus promised his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit. He told them he would turn their sorrow to rejoicing, but he gave them no specifics as to how or when this would happen. Jesus' disciples came to Jerusalem for Pentecost and gathered together in an upper room to wait. They were waiting for Jesus to return to them, just one more time, as he had done several times in the days since his resurrection. Jesus does not appear, but he sends the Spirit to weave this disparate and despairing group of followers into the church.

¹ Story from sermon by Barry J. Robinson, "Public Speaking: A Pentecost Sermon" Pentecost/A, May 11, 2008.

At Pentecost receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. We do not receive this gift to feel more personally connected to God or to feel holier or more righteous. We receive the Holy Spirit so we might prophesy, so that we might share the Good News with others, confront evildoers and bring about the kin-dom of God here on earth. We receive the Holy Spirit so we can be the church. Pentecost is a powerfully public event because God intends for us to become powerfully public people. We receive the Holy Spirit so that we may never again be afraid to speak up, to say what needs to be said, to communicate with each other in healthy, life affirming ways. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit so that we might never again feel alone, never feel as though something is impossible to overcome, never again believe that we are not equipped to be his disciples.

Peter came forward that morning to defend his fellow disciples and to set the record straight. It is easy to dismiss those things we can not explain, the things that frighten us by their mystery. We can minimize something by saying, “don’t pay any attention to them, they are drunk or high or under some kind of influence that is other than holy.” The only influence they were under was the power of God’s love. The Holy Spirit brings to us a spirit of compassion and gentleness and love and grace. It is not a deceptive spirit. God does not give us the Holy Spirit in order to divide God’s people, but rather to bring us together. Each one of us receives the gift of the Spirit at our baptism. However, not all of us fully claim this gift.

Pentecost is more than a story of what happened long ago, it is an opportunity. It is more than a chance to celebrate the birth of the church, it is a chance to be swept away, to recommit ourselves as Christ’s disciples. Last week we gathered as 19 young people confirmed their faith. Dick reminded us that confirmation is a rite of passage, the moment when we go from being childlike in our faith, to taking it more seriously. It is the moment when we begin to articulate for ourselves what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

As we live this life of faith, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will be our companion. If Jesus can no longer be with us, then the Holy Spirit will be with us instead. When we don’t know what to say, the Holy Spirit will give us the words to speak. When we hesitate to visit or call or let another person know we care, the Holy Spirit will move us to respond. Like the church-members in the opening story, when we are inclined to let someone else do what is difficult or controversial or risky, it will be the Holy Spirit that moves us beyond our fear to do what is right.

We are never alone. The Holy Spirit is always with us, giving us whatever we need to be the disciples Jesus expects us to be. Stand back and watch the miracles unfold. The mystery of Pentecost is that no matter what was said that day, everyone understood. Perhaps that is because they were speaking the language of love, the language of mercy and the language of grace. They were speaking the universal language everyone who follows Jesus understands. May our lives proclaim that same truth and may all those who meet us truly understand. May it be so! Amen