

Message for Pentecost, June 4, 2017

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passage: Acts 2:1-18

Come, Holy Spirit!

Last week we left the gathered disciples in transition. They were huddled in an upper room, praying and waiting. Jesus, their leader, their risen Savior, had just left them in a very dramatic way – he was lifted up to heaven and out of their sight. He was gone. But before he left he gave them a promise: Wait for it, he told them. “You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

Do you think by this time – after the resurrection, after the ascension, these marvelous events no one could have imagined – that the disciples were expecting something fantastic to happen? Who knows? I figure they didn’t know what to expect. On the day of Pentecost, a Jewish festival that drew participants from all over the Middle East and beyond, they are once again gathered in one place to pray and to wait. “Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” Fantastic indeed!

Just as Jesus had promised, they are baptized with the Holy Spirit. God’s Spirit comes upon them. God’s Spirit opens up amazing possibilities. They begin to speak in other languages. Folks hear what is being said each in their own language. Communication flows easily and seamlessly. It was as God had promised through the prophet Joel: “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream

dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

Amazing. When God’s Spirit is present, anything is possible. We hear this Pentecost story and think, isn’t it wonderful that this happened? Those first apostles really got confirmation of their faith. They got the boost they needed to get out into the world and share the good news of Jesus Christ. We’re grateful that this happened, but those were different times. We don’t expect anything like that to happen now. Things don’t work like that anymore, do they?

In fact, we don’t really know what to do with the Holy Spirit. And we don’t know what the Holy Spirit is supposed to do with us. It’s a nice thing to say – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It’s part of the way we express our faith. But what does it really mean? What we are forgetting, I think, is that the Holy Spirit is not some unique and separate element of our faith. When we speak of the Holy Spirit it is God we’re talking about. The Holy Spirit is not separate from God. The Holy Spirit is God’s own spirit with us and in us. It is the presence of the Creator always with us. It is the love of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, made real in our lives.

Our Pentecostal brothers and sisters have much to teach us about how the Holy Spirit works in our lives and the life of the church. This morning I will be sharing with you some observations from Cheryl Bridges Johns, professor of discipleship and Christian formation at the Pentecostal Theological Seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee. Professor Johns wrote an interesting article entitled, “Overcoming Holy Spirit shyness in the life of the church.” Perhaps that describes us: We tend to be Holy Spirit shy.

Professor Johns says that it is important to recognize and welcome the presence of the Holy Spirit among us, not as a silent partner but as very real, overt, dynamic presence. After all, the Holy Spirit is what makes our God connection real. The Spirit is God working within us. The Spirit makes us God-like. Through the Spirit, space, time and people become holy. The most ordinary spaces become sacred. Ordinary time becomes sacred time. Ordinary speech becomes Spirit-speech, and ordinary people become vessels of God's grace. This is what happened on that first Pentecost, but it also happens today in less fantastic ways. Carol Penner, a Mennonite pastor and chaplain, tells a story that shows how this happens:

Carol tells of being part of a tense congregational meeting. "It had been going on for a number of hours," she says, "and people were emotionally wrung out. The issues we were speaking of were deeply felt and deeply painful. Many tears and some angry words had been exchanged."

Then a woman who was prone to long discourses and wandering away from the point at hand got up to speak. "I would probably have voted her least likely to say something helpful," Carol says. "In this situation, however, she spoke clearly, concisely, and with power. Her observations about where we were as a church were spot on, and we all realized it."

The woman sat down and a man stood up. He had a brain injury and was slow of speech. In his careful way of saying things, he also commented on where they were as a church and what they were about. A long silence followed these comments. There was nothing left to say that day. The meeting was closed with prayer. There was a feeling of renewed hope.

Carol writes: “I think everyone at that meeting was following Jesus. We were given a special gift of hope in that dark time by two people the Spirit chose. We ask for light on dim pathways, and the Spirit provides it. The Spirit works not only through the educated and articulate people but also in the humblest and simplest people. The Spirit filled and breathed insight and words into people – powerful, important words, which were accepted and received by an attentive community.”

The Holy Spirit gives precious gifts, gifts that make the life of God known. Gifts that make the will of God known. By the gifts of the Spirit, the church can know what cannot otherwise be known. The Spirit gives gifts without regard to race, gender, ability or social status. Indeed, these gifts often mock human rationality and human knowing. The illiterate can have great gifts of knowledge and wisdom. The inarticulate can speak profound words in an unknown language. Those who are poor and dispossessed find great wealth. No person or possibility is beyond the pale. Through the Spirit, ordinary space, time and people become holy.

We don’t know exactly how this happens, and that is somehow also the point. The Holy Spirit helps us enter into mystery. With the Spirit we enter into the great mystery that is the triune God, the mystery that is God revealed through Jesus Christ. This mystery is deep and wide and forever opening up to include those who are seeking. Mystery, in this sense, is not some deep, dark secret which we are not meant to understand. Mystery is actually endless knowability, to quote Richard Rohr. There is no end to what we can learn about God. There is no end to what God can do.

This applies to scripture as well. The Holy Spirit is present in the ancient words and stories of the Bible. This is very true to my experience. With the Spirit’s help, the

text comes alive; the Word of God conveys the actual presence of God. It testifies and invites people into the very life of God. It is an ongoing witness to God's work in the world. The Bible, though very old, is not stagnant or stuck in the past. Instead, when one is open to the Spirit's leading scripture becomes a sometimes surprising conduit to new understanding. I find this exciting and invigorating!

The Holy Spirit helps us to know and to believe. And then the Spirit helps us live out our faith. Prof. Cheryl Bridges Johns writes that the fullness of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church will result in a "great baptism of love." Now, that sounds wonderful – a great messy, splashy baptism of love. By the power of the Spirit, she says, the inner life of God – a life of love – comes to dwell within the church, the body of Christ. This love transcends social, race and gender barriers. It overflows onto and touches everyone. And the other fruits of the Holy Spirit – joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – are evident as well. These are the identifying characteristics of the Spirit at work. When there is love between brothers and sisters, love for the broader community, love for the world, that is God at work in us through the Holy Spirit. Whenever there is joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, it is a sign of God dwelling within us through the Holy Spirit. This is not something far removed from us, or somehow out of our reach. This is God's Spirit present with us here and now. Through the Spirit, ordinary space, time and people become holy.

Yes, I do believe that the Holy Spirit still sometimes works in fantastic ways, like what happened at the first Pentecost. In many parts of the world – and in Pentecostal congregations here in the U.S. – the powerful presence of the Spirit is experienced much

more directly. That is generally not our experience here at Glennon Heights, though I don't discount that it could happen. However, just because fantastic things haven't happened does not mean that the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, is not with us. We just need to learn to recognize the signs.

Through the Spirit, ordinary space, time and people become holy. Gifts are given. Sometimes surprising gifts that mock human knowing and rationality. No person or possibility is beyond the pale.

Through the Spirit we enter into the great mystery that is the triune God, the mystery that is God revealed through Jesus Christ. We are part of this mystery. Our hearts and minds and lives are opened up to the endless knowability that is God.

Through the Spirit the scriptures are opened up to us as well. With the Spirit's help, the text comes alive; the Word of God conveys the actual presence of God. It testifies and invites people into the very life of God. It is an ongoing witness to God's work in the world.

Through the Spirit we receive a great baptism of love. By the power of the Spirit, the inner life of God – a life of love – comes to dwell within the body of Christ. This results in what we call the fruits of the Spirit: joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are the characteristics – very familiar to us here at Glennon Heights, we see them weekly in each other – of God's Spirit present and active in our lives. These are the signs.

Wait for it, Jesus told his disciples. "You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." This same Holy Spirit lives with us and within us today. Along with the disciples of old, we have received this gift and we will continue to receive it. It is the gift of God's

presence with us, always, forever, in every circumstance and place. And it is very real.

Come, Holy Spirit! Amen.