

Pentecost, Year A  
Acts 2 and John 20  
May 11, 2008  
Bill Ellis

On this, the festival that is often happily called “The Birthday of the Church,” we have before us not one but two quite different accounts of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. In John’s account it is “the evening of the day of the Resurrection, the first day of the week.” Jesus appears miraculously to his disciples, coming through a locked door to be with them. After showing them his hands and side, proof as we should understand it that the one who now stood before them was indeed the very one who had been crucified just two days before, he commissioned them for service saying: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Having said this, he breathed upon them and said further: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

The second account, the one from Acts, is remarkably different. It takes place not on the night of the resurrection, but fifty days later on the Jewish feast of Pentecost. Jesus is not around, since he ascended into heaven ten days before, and the effect of Holy Spirit on the disciples is astounding. Empowered by the Spirit the disciples leave their locked room where they had huddled as much for safety as for companionship and enter the streets proclaiming the word of God in

ways that every one in the area could understand in spite of the huge variety of languages and cultures that were represented in the vicinity.

If this were a historical problem to be solved it would be at least puzzling and at worst troublesome. I am not sure how to create a truly plausible explanation for giving the exact same Holy Spirit to the exact same group of people on two completely separate occasions, nor can I explain how the disciples, having once received the Holy Spirit directly from the Risen Jesus himself would continue to hide for an additional fifty days in spite of being commissioned and sent out. Nor could I explain how in John's Gospel Jesus next found them fishing by the Sea of Galilee, while in Luke and Acts they huddle in Jerusalem until Pentecost. I suspect that the compilers of the lectionary for the 1928 Prayer Book, and many previous ones, looked at the situation in just this way, because in that lectionary we get only the Acts story, and not the one from John. Thus we were all shielded from exposure to both stories at once, and from the question that arises from comparing them.

In my view however what we have here before us today is not a historical problem to be solved, we have instead a theological motif to be explored. Both John and Luke are saying something important about the presence of God in and with the Church and her members, and what is significant is that as different as these two stories are, they convey pretty much the same message, for in both cases the gift of the Spirit turns the disciples from a frightened and evidently purposeless collection of individuals into a coherent group empowered by God

for a specific mission. In John that mission is to go out and do what only God can do, bind and loose, forgive and retain. In Luke that mission is to proclaim the good news of what God has done in Christ to everyone everywhere in terms their audiences can understand. What we see therefore in these stories is the claim that it is the Spirit of God and not the initiative of her members that empowers the church for her mission.

That is a very significant claim, and it constitutes the real Good News of these passages, a claim that I embrace and believe, and hope you all do as well. For what it means is that regardless of how we might feel at any given moment, regardless of how things might be going for us either as individuals or as a church, God is with us whether we know it or not and forming us for mission whether we know it or not. Beyond that, it also gives us a way in faith of understanding how God is working with and in us both corporately as an institution and individually as members of that institution.

At the corporate level, the level of the Church herself in general and this congregation specifically we must constantly be asking ourselves in what way are we proclaiming the good news of what God did in Christ to our community in ways this community can understand. What are we doing as a community through our teaching, our preaching, our youth work, our choirs, our outreach our guilds our relationships with one another within the church that convey the message of God's unconditional love for us to people who are not members in terms that make sense to those people? Where we find that we are making sense

to the community of Spokane then we know that the Spirit is at work. Similarly, where we see forgiveness and reconciliation bringing together those who have been separated by some sort of contention, there we see the Spirit at work. So it isn't a question of looking for miracles, a rushing wind, tongues of fire or the appearance of Jesus as he lived on earth coming to be in our midst. It is not even the ability to speak in tongues, that rather controversial gift that finds expression not just in Christianity but in all the world's great religions. It is rather that clear expression of God's love for this world made known in Jesus in ways people can relate to. Sometimes that means we tell the old stories in the old ways, and sometimes it means we tell them in entirely new ways, using entirely new language. Sometimes it means we don't speak at all, but instead do something, be it a simple act of mercy unnoticed by all but the immediate recipient, or a prophetic protest that "speaks the truth to power." Where the church understands her contemporary context so well that she can relate creatively and honestly both to her own tradition and to her contemporary milieu there is the Spirit at work, and there is miracle enough.

I think the same is true at the level of the individual as well. We ask ourselves, people ask me, how they can know that the Spirit is at work in them. In one sense the answer is that you can't know that, for none of us has that kind of knowledge of God, and frankly it scares me more than a little bit to presume such knowledge. But on the other hand our stories for today are powerfully suggestive of just how to discern the active working of the Spirit in us. When

you discover that you are motivated increasingly by genuine compassion for others, those you like and care for, as well as those maybe not so much, our stories for today suggest that this is the work of the Spirit in you. When you find that your witness to that compassion is increasingly coherent, that it makes enough sense to you that you are able to speak about it to others, our stories for today suggest that this is the work of the Spirit in you. When your life begins to make more sense and have more purpose because of that compassion, when you begin to be motivated to work for a world in which that kind of compassion has more room to grow, so that justice might be spread more widely, our stories for today suggest that this is the Spirit working in you.

Again we must notice that none of this requires, or even implies remarkable events. It implies instead the kind of openness we see in the passages from Acts and John, an openness that took the disciples out into a world that ranged mostly from indifferent to hostile in order that what God had done in them might be manifested everywhere. It wasn't then and isn't now about doing big amazing things. It is about doing little things over and over again. As Mother Teresa once said, we can't really do great things, we can only do little things with love.

The birthday of the church is a great moment, and today we have two stories to help us celebrate that birth. Both of them tell of a small band of people gathered together without much sense of direction transformed into a confident and purposeful organization now able to move into the world proclaiming the

presence and power of God in the crucified and risen Christ. Both stories proclaim that it was the Spirit of God that made this possible. That group constituted our spiritual ancestors. That means nothing less than the work which they did is now ours, and the Spirit from on high that touched and inspired them now touches and inspires us.