

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

May 11, 2008

Pentecost A – 2008

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the Feast of Pentecost and we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit and the birth of something new and unexpected – the Church! We must remember that during his earthly ministry Jesus did many things – he taught, healed, fed, touched, forgave – and his very being was the Good News in the world. One thing Jesus did not do was to found an institution. In last week’s Gospel lesson, we eavesdropped on Jesus’ prayer for us. They were the final words of his prayer to the Father at the Last Supper before his betrayal and arrest. Having promised his disciples that they would not be left as orphans, he placed us with confidence into the Father’s care. He trusted totally and left it up to the Father.

Today we celebrate God’s answer – the gift of the Holy Spirit to the assembled disciples. In our readings, we have two different and differing accounts of this – our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles by Luke and our Gospel lesson from John. Luke’s account occurs after the Ascension on the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, which celebrated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The Spirit descends rather spectacularly as flames upon the twelve Apostles assembled there – eleven of the original 12 and Mathias who had already been elected to replace Judas Iscariot. Luke’s account is colorful and exciting – miraculously the Apostles can speak foreign languages or at least the people hear them in their own languages. The Jews visiting

Jerusalem from all parts of the Roman Empire are astounded and marvel. Peter, a poor fisherman and probably the least socially talented of them all, is moved to preach and he does so with learning and eloquence quoting from the prophets.

John's account is different and more intimate. The disciples are gathered in a locked room in Jerusalem for fear of the Jews. The disciples are both unnamed and unnumbered; we only know that Thomas, one of the twelve, was missing for some unknown reason. In John, the Spirit is imparted by Jesus breathing upon them and saying, "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 event occurs on Easter during Jesus' first group post-resurrection appearance.

So what are we to make of these two different and differing accounts of the gift of the Holy Spirit? For one, I hope they disabuse us of any notion that the Gospels are literal, newspaper-type reporting of the life of Jesus. They are accounts written 40-80 years after Jesus' earthly ministry by various communities of followers of Jesus who lived in different times, places and cultures. While based on traditions about events in Jesus' life, they primarily are theological reflections about their encounters with the Risen Christ. In other words, how do they experience the teachings and love of Jesus Christ in their lives and times and what does that tell them about God.

John ties the gift of the Holy Spirit to the God's ratification and glorification of Jesus in the Resurrection. So setting it at the first Resurrection appearance to a group on Easter Day is a bold theological statement: God's action on Easter outshines all that God has done in the past, even the illumination of Moses at Mt. Sinai.

It is no accident that John describes Jesus as imparting the Spirit to a group of unnamed and unnumbered disciples. That was how John's isolated community of

largely Jewish followers of Jesus experienced the presence of God in *their* community. God could be present in and working through anyone and everyone acting in community. It is no accident that Luke had the Spirit descend upon the Twelve named Apostles who were already organized into an institution that had a succession plan in place as shown by their election of Mathias as successor to the place left by Judas. Luke's community was a largely gentile group living in the Roman Empire of the late first century. That was how they experienced the Spirit of God working in *their* community.

In John, the power of the Spirit is seen in the love and loyalty of the members of the community. Its fruits are found in forgiveness and reconciliation. In Luke, the power of the Spirit is experienced as inspiration, fire and language. Its fruits are found in evangelism.

Well, who is right? Is that even an appropriate question? Jesus entrusted us to God and it is possible that God through the Holy Spirit finds us and guides us wherever we may be. We live in different places, times and cultures but somehow the Spirit finds us and guides us wherever we may be.

I usually don't tell jokes in my sermons but this one (told to me by Dee Mahuna) touches on the way the world and the church are today and our need to be open to and experience the Spirit who is wiser and more generous than we:

I was walking across a bridge on day when I saw a man standing on the edge about to jump. I ran over and said "Stop. Don't do it." "Why shouldn't I?" he replied. "Well", I said, "there's so much to live for." "Like what?" he replied. I said "Well are you religious or atheist?" "Religious" he said. "Me too" I replied, "are you Christian , Jewish or Buddhist?" "Christian" "Me too!" I said. "Are you

Catholic or Protestant” “Protestant” “Me too” I said. “Are you Episcopal, Methodist or Baptist?” “Baptist.” “Wow, me too!” I said. “Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?” “Baptist Church of God”. I said, “Me too! Are you original Baptist Church of God or Reformed Baptist Church of God?” “Reformed Baptist Church of God.” I said “Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God reformation of 1879 or Reformed Baptist Church of God reformation of 1915?” “Reformed Baptist Church of God reformation of 1915.” I said, “Go ahead and jump, you heretic!”

I think the joke is closer to the truth than we think. It describes what happens when we don't make room for the spirit in our lives. This happens when we forget the lessons Pentecost teaches us:

1. The same spirit that descended on the disciples on Pentecost is the same Spirit present in creation and the same Spirit that sustains all life and all being. We are all created in the image of God.
2. Jesus is Lord. That being the case, no one else – no politician, no ecclesiastical authority, no hierarch, no one of us can claim that role.
3. Through the Spirit we are united with Christ and are his Body in the world. The Spirit is given to further Christ's mission in the world. That should be our focus.
4. We are united in our common creation and through the gift of the Spirit in Baptism. No one is alone. We cannot know the fullness of God's being nor the future to which God is calling us alone. The fullness of God's Spirit is found in the wholeness of Creation and not in any one of its parts.

The Spirit was experienced differently by the communities of Luke and John but it unites them across time and cultures in ways that make their differences insignificant. Would that we would be able to see that in our world, in our nation and in our church!

Today is also Mothers' Day and I wish all mothers a Happy Mothers' Day. It got me thinking about how Mother's really plant deeply the seeds of who we become. I thought of my own mother who died 42 years ago and of her mother whom she didn't know because she died when my mother was 2. I thought of the pictures and paintings of my great and great-great grandmothers that were in the house. All of these women lived in vastly different times, places and cultures – but they are all ohana; they are all family. The Spirit was imparted to each and to me at Baptism. We are all members of the Body of Christ. The differences in thoughts and customs between 1830 when my great-great-grandmother was born and today are vast, but the Holy Spirit was present and our differences are nothing compared to what we have in common in the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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