

## Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

May 31, 2009

Pentecost B 2009

Today is Pentecost Sunday and we celebrate the birthday of the Church and the imparting of the Holy Spirit to the Disciples in the upper room – events that are related to each other. Am I the only one here who has a hard time wrapping my brain around the concept of the Holy Spirit? Does anyone here remember when the Holy Spirit was referred to as the Holy Ghost? Boy, did I have trouble with that as a kid! How was an eight year old to know that that was anglicized version of “Geist”, a German word that doesn’t translate very well into English, but generally means a mindful, purposeful animating spirit?

I take some comfort that even the author of Luke has trouble describing the Holy Spirit in our reading from Acts. He uses images, metaphors to describe the arrival of the Holy Spirit: “there came a sound *like a rush of violent wind*”; “*Divided tongues as of fire, appeared among them.*” How do you describe something unseen but nevertheless perceived and trusted as real? Most of the references to the Spirit in the Bible – water, fire, wind – are of things not seen except by their effects on something material, something visible. The Spirit is perceived and thus described by the results of its action upon someone or something. The Spirit is by nature relational. It is not unlike our understanding of love.

Some Christians appear to firmly believe that the Holy Spirit is uniquely Christian property. But that isn’t true. Psalm 104 which we read today is thought to be one of the earliest writings in the Bible. It is a lyrical song – a hymn to God in praise of Creation. We can easily sing this hymn here in Hawai’i. Just look up into the West Maui Mountains as you leave church today and you’ll see why. This Psalm tells a great truth known in the earliest times – the Glory of God is seen in Creation. The creative agent is the Spirit of God

that creates and sustains creation. The Bible opens with the first creation story when “a wind from God swept over the waters” of dark chaos. It seems it was known from very early on that God’s spirit permeates all creation giving it life. Creation is continuous with God’s Spirit continually renewing life. Psalm 104 tells us what our attitude should be when we are in the midst of Creation – we should sing praises to God. Implicit in praise are both recognition and gratitude. Again, living on Mau, it is easy to recognize the glory of God in Creation and to be grateful.

So if the presence of the Holy Spirit is not new and its manifestation not unique to Christianity, what are we to make of Luke’s account in our reading from Acts? Peter’s reference to prophesy in the Book of Joel is done to mark that the Pentecost is a milestone in the history of God’s dealings with humanity. A new awareness of the power and presence of the Spirit comes over the disciples emerging from their experience of Jesus as the Risen Christ. God is ushering in a new era, new beginnings: now the Spirit is poured out on all men and women – even slaves. All will be able to proclaim the Lord.

Did you notice the great variety of peoples enumerated in today’s account of Pentecost and the particularity evident in listing them – Parthians, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Romans, etc.? Did you notice the mention that they included both those that were Jews and those who are proselytes, that is, non-Jewish seekers? The Spirit permitted not only the disciple to speak but enable all these various peoples to hear the word of the Gospel each in his or her own tongue.

Something new is happening. Informed by their experience of Jesus Christ, the disciples experience that the Holy Spirit is pluralist – it fills and enlivens the entire world and all peoples without obliterating the own special identities. It respects languages and cultures and other forms of uniqueness. At the same time, the Holy Spirit is inclusive. The experience of the Risen Christ enables the disciples to also set aside human society’s

distinctions and to see the unity that comes from belief in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

In our Gospel lesson from John, Jesus in his last teaching words promises to send them an Advocate that will continue to enliven and inform them after his departure. The Holy Spirit will show the world three things: 1. That the world's idea of sin is wrong – sin is not cultic or purity code violations like healing on the Sabbath or touching a leper – it is failure to believe in the life and way of Jesus Christ; 2. That the world's view of righteousness is wrong – it is those who believe in Jesus and follow Jesus' way who are righteous and not those who called him a blasphemer; and 3. the world's judgment is wrong – the rulers of the world are the ones who are condemned and not Jesus Christ who has conquered sin. Jesus promises that the Spirit will be with the community for all time, speaking to them as he did – the words of truth that he hears from the Father.

So what does this have to do with us in 2009? When we were baptized, the priest anointed us with oil in the sign of the cross and said on behalf of the Church “You are sealed with the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.” What does that mean for us? As living human beings we had already been given the breath of life by the spirit. I think it is a way of saying that by coming to Baptism into the Body of Christ we have reached a new awareness of the Spirit through our belief in Jesus as Lord. Imbedded in this is also a question. **What new behavior, what new understandings will emerge from this new consciousness?** The Spirit gives us ears to hear new things as well as tongues with which to speak.

Without the Spirit, the church becomes a voiceless, self-involved and irrelevant institution. The Christian Church is called not to impose a uniformity of culture or uniformity of worship and thought but to create a unity within diversity. When we are

unable to put pluralism together with equality and come together to be fed at the table and go out the door together to do ministry in the world, we have failed. We have often failed. Slavery was tolerated if not promoted by the church for centuries until people like William Wilberforce and John Wesley heard the Spirit and were set on fire to speak against it. Racism and tribalism were and still are often tolerated by the Church, but people like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jonathan Myrick Daniels heard the Spirit and were willing to be reviled and, indeed, killed by the world because they spoke out.

Jesus is quoted in John as saying, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own but he will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.” Jesus promises that the Spirit in time will pull back the curtain and show that those in charge of the world and its judgments and punishments are in error and are themselves condemned.

Do we really believe in the forgiving and transformative love of God experienced in the life of Jesus and heard through the Spirit in our own lives and communities? Can we see the Christ in others who are different from us and recognize that our baptism and the Spirit bind us together? If so, what are we called to be and do? Did you notice that in Acts, the Spirit arrived during a meeting? It seems the Spirit often comes when we gather together to ask questions like these. We just have to pray for ears with which to listen

What might the Spirit be saying to us today about our lives and the effects we have on our planet? What might the Spirit be saying about peace in our lives and in the world? To what injustices and pain might the Spirit be directing our eyes and hearts? Are we ready to bear them? Amen.