

*Pentecost – May 20, 2018 -- “A Cross-Shaped Life: A Guiding Light” – Rev. Seth D Jones*

*Scripture: Acts 2:1-21; Philippians 4:4-7*

In the ancient church, the awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit was called ‘*illumination*’. This is a great word for the experience, because it at once refers to the light of God and also is not a blinding bulb that turns us away. Instead, the Holy Spirit is like the soft background light radiating underneath all of Creation.

Every time we feel the Spirit, it is like a lantern glowing in the dusk of the personal, the individual, the present. With its soft light, we begin to see hints of the universal, the great community of saints, the eternal. Whether you have been a part of the church or not, I am sure you have had the experience of the world opening up to an awareness of that which lays beyond the self. We call this the presence of the Holy Spirit.

I want to share with you one of my experiences of the presence of the Holy Spirit. I was ordained on Father’s Day weekend 10 years ago. The lead-up to ordination in the Congregational tradition is a little nerve-wracking. The tradition of my ordaining church, Colonial Church of Edina, in Minnesota, prides itself on being thoroughly Congregational in its approach. This means assurances from my seminary that I was a good candidate. Fortunately, I had made good impressions on my professors.

Once that hurdle is cleared, the church called what is known in our tradition as a *vicinage council*. A vicinage council is a gathering of sister churches in the area to make a decision, whatever it may be. In this case, the decision to be made was whether I was qualified to be a minister in the Congregational church. The vicinage council, for me anyway, was about 3.5 hours on a Saturday afternoon. It is, for lack of a better word, an interrogation. Anyone from any Congregational church is invited and about 40 people showed up to question me on all sorts of questions about personal faith, my formation, theology – whatever they think they need to know. Fortunately, my vicinage council was facilitated by one of my mentors, Rev. Jeff Lindsay, who may be the friendliest person on the planet.

He is the black lab of Congregational ministers, and has the beautiful black hair to prove it.

The most stressful thing about a vicinage council is, throughout all the questioning, you know you will leave the room at the end, and a discussion will be had, and then a vote will be held. People voting on your qualifications is always a stressful thing.

But this is all foundational to the experience of the actual service of ordination that happened the following day. Without the preparation and stress of the council, I am not sure I would have been as open to the presence of the Holy Spirit at the service.

At my ordination, I had family and friends, teachers from seminary, congregants from our church, mentors from my childhood, and people I had never seen before. There were about 300 people there. Rather than traditional organ music, we asked a bluegrass band to play for the service. I had a service filled with old gospel tunes and Appalachian music. Rev. Lindsay preached the ordination sermon.

A large group of clergy and anyone else who wanted to came up and laid hands on me to bless my ministry.

I hate being the focus of attention for most things, and this was no different. Nonetheless, about halfway through, I began to feel the whole room was filled with what can only be described as a soft spiritual light. Something changed and all of us were gathered into a soft embrace of this light.

This is the Holy Spirit.

I tell you this story because this seems to be the way the Holy Spirit works. First, the experience of the Holy Spirit is intensely personal. God is never interested in people as a group; God is interested in individuals who gather together. Thus, the Holy Spirit is always a subjective, personal experience that you have, that I have. But, the Holy Spirit also calls each of us individually to gather together in Christ's name. So secondly, the Holy Spirit is always an experience of the gathered people of faith. This is what church is –

the gathering of people who have had a subjective, personal experience of God who choose to be involved in finding out what that means.

Remember the question that starts Peter's sermon today? *What does this mean?*, the people ask.

So take a moment here and reflect on what it means Every Time You Feel the Spirit.

### ***Choir sings "Every Time I Feel The Spirit"***

The language for how to speak of our experiences of the Holy Spirit is imperfect at best, and very difficult at worst. Our reading today describes the arrival of the Holy Spirit as a great wind blowing through the room and leaving tongues of fire on the heads of the disciples. This is kind of what she is like. Soren Kierkegaard calls this way of speaking '*transferred language*', or '*metaphoric language*'. The words, which are symbols, point to symbolic ways of speaking about that which cannot be described.

Another way to talk about the Holy Spirit is like how she is described at Jesus' baptism – a dove descending from the sky.

The day the Spirit came to the disciples inspired them and pointed them to the deepest truth they could understand. The Spirit drove them outside and into the crowds to share what they knew. They, as Scripture calls it, prophesied. Prophecy back in the ancient world was not how we understand the word today. Today, prophecy means to tell the future. Prophecy means to predict things about individuals and worlds. But back when Peter and the disciples were standing in the middle of the crowd of Jerusalem, prophecy meant 'truth-telling'. This is a much better understanding of prophecy. When truth-telling is about what God is doing, there are always aspects that reach into the future, just as truth-telling also reaches deep into the past. This is because God is eternal, and time is no longer an important aspect of the truth.

We must use words to talk about these things. Language is really the only way we can have some understanding of what we are experiencing with one another.

What makes that really difficult in our story today is that no one who has gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of Weeks speaks the same language. Or more likely, many people spoke many different languages. Then, you would have to go through the work of figuring out if they spoke Latin, as they did in the Roman Empire; or Hebrew, as they did in the religious circles of the region; or Aramaic, which was the primary language of the Sinai peninsula of the day; or whatever other language was coming through the town that day. Communication would have been a challenge – not impossible, but a challenge.

The miracle of Pentecost, however, is not that every person in Jerusalem understood a new language in order to understand what Peter was saying. The miracle is that what Peter was saying was

understood in the native tongue of each person there. The language in which the person was raised and was most familiar was the language in which the person heard Peter's words. In other words, this is not a miracle of understanding; it is a miracle of hearing.

Another prophet in Scripture, Jeremiah, speaks of this day of Pentecost when he says,

*But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord...(Jer 31:31-34a)*

Jeremiah is saying we will hear the presence of God in all ways, and will no longer need to be taught how to listen for God. This is the work of the Holy Spirit – hearing the presence of God among us; listening for the Holy Spirit in everything that is being said around us, regardless of who is saying it.

What a word for this day and age, where everyone wants to be heard, but so few want to listen.

Today, on Pentecost, we find out that the great work of the Holy Spirit, beyond all the theology, beyond all the doctrine, beyond all the quarrels in family, town, and nation, the great work is hearing and listening.

### ***Choir sings "I Was There When the Spirit Came"***

It has been said that the defining characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century is the continual and unending sense of anxiety which surrounds us all the time. The prophecies of the age mostly speak to a dark future, with a few bright-eyed technonauts here and there promising a shiny, computerized utopia. Which also sounds terrifying.

After World War 1, WH Auden wrote a book-length poem called *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Ecologue*. In it he describes what happens when anxiety takes hold of the soul. He says,

*"We would rather be ruined than changed  
We would rather die in our dread  
Than climb the cross of the moment  
And let our illusions die."*

Anxiety turns the ability to hear into the desire to be listened to. Anxiety turns the excitement of change and new things into the horror of the possible ruin of the stable and old. Anxiety turns excitement into dread. Anxiety turns the desire for truth into the desire to stay in one's bed, knees pulled to the chest and the covers tucked closely under the chin, in such a way that the fragile and perfectly crafted personal world we have created will never be challenged by the burden of the needs of the world which paw at the door beyond our bedroom.

Anxiety is the extended and unresolved continuation of worry that never resolves. A faith which pushes us out into the world, in front of people and calls for us to speak up for the presence of God, Christ, and Spirit is a faith which is a direct challenge to the introverted, the depressive, the quiet. But the faith is also a challenge for the extrovert, the exuberant, and the loud.

One must speak in order to be heard; the other must listen in order to understand. The work of the Holy Spirit is deeply personal, intimate and profound.

Most of all, though, the work of the Holy Spirit cuts through all the anxiety of every age with a simple promise and outcome – joy in the Lord. Paul says “*Rejoice*” to the Philippian church. Rejoicing in the Lord is itself a prophetic act, an act of the Holy Spirit. Merely gathering together on a day like this, listening for the presence of the Holy Spirit together, is an act of prophecy.

Why? Because the Holy Spirit proclaims the joy of the Lord even in the midst of personal fears and anxieties, even right in the middle of national and cultural anxieties and pressures. This is because the first miracle of the Holy Spirit is the act of listening, of hearing. In order to truly hear, anxiety cannot speak or be present, otherwise all that will be heard is the noise of the anxious. And, like all the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Judeans, Cappadocians, Pontusians, Asians, Phrygians, Pamphylans, Egyptians, Cyrenians, Romans,

we can only hear the deepest truths best in our own language. Why? Because the Holy Spirit is concerned about you, the individual, first and foremost.

Listen, then, to the words of our teacher and savior, Jesus Christ, as he speaks to us about the anxiety of our age:

***Choir starts humming “O, Happy Day”***

*Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat and what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these...Therefore do not worry...indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.*

*Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, his truth, his care, his joy – all these things will be given to you. (Matthew 6:25-33)*

On Pentecost, peace, love, grace, is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the guiding light made available to all, if only, like all the people gathered in Jerusalem, we would hear it.

***Choir sings “O Happy Day”***