

06/08/2014 -- Pentecost A

“*The Body of Christ Sent Forth with Power and Peace*” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Numbers 11:24-30; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23 (John 7:37-39)

Fifty days ago, we celebrated the Resurrection of Jesus Christ together. In celebrating that event, we acknowledge with the vast tradition of the Christian faith that Jesus ‘came into his own’ during the Resurrection. In other words, Jesus’ resurrection is the fullest expression of who Jesus truly is - the fully human Son of the Infinite Divine. We acknowledge Jesus to be fully human and fully divine in his resurrection; and in his resurrection we see the fullest expression of what that means.

The Athanasian Creed, which is attributed to Athanasius who died in 373 AD but was probably written around 450 AD, says it in this way:

*It is necessary for eternal salvation that (we) believe steadfastly in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is both God and man. As God, he was begotten of the substance of the Father before time; as man, he was born in time of the substance of his mother. He is perfect God; and he is perfect man, with a rational soul and human flesh. He is equal to the Father in his divinity; but inferior to the Father in his humanity. Although he is God and man, he is not two, but one Christ.*

This is pretty wild stuff. It means Jesus is just like us and just like God. That is a statement which really only matters if we believe Jesus being like us and like God matters to us, if Jesus and God are actually doing something in making such a thing so. Jesus as the fully human and fully divine Son of God matters if we live in a broken world, because Jesus resurrected means that on the cross and in the resurrection God, through his steadfast love of the world, has conquered sin and death and evil. They are no longer the final word on our lives. Jesus as the fully human and fully divine Son of God matters if we seek to live a spiritually meaningful life, because Jesus resurrected means God’s promises to us are fulfilled in him and we now have a foundation in which our souls can make meaning of our lives. All this matters if we read Scripture ‘*anthropologically*’, or as an account of the nature of humankind. If we read Scripture ‘*anthropologically*’ it turns out God has a pretty high view of God’s created beings.

We are created in the ‘*image of God*’, as Genesis 1:27 tells us. When Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, God says to his Heavenly Council, “*Look, the human beings have become like us, knowing good and evil*” (Gen 3:22). We are like God; we have become like God. The Psalmist says in Psalm 82, “*I say, ‘You are gods; you are children of the Most High. But you will die like mere mortals and fall like*

every other ruler” (82:6-7). Jesus does not deny this when the Jewish authorities accuse him of blasphemy for making himself like God. In John 10, the text reads,

*“The Jews answered him, ‘It is not good for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God’  
Then Jesus answered them, ‘Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods’?  
If he called them gods to whom the word of God came - and Scripture cannot be broken - do you say of him whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God?’” (Jn 10:33-36).*

If you are anything like me, you have probably incorporated a very dark and low view of the human being into your mind. This is a very Protestant view of the human soul. We are, particularly in the Puritan tradition, not much better than worms. We are, in this view, so consumed and stained with sin and evil that we are not even seen by God. We crawl toward a shimmering light; we *‘slouch toward Bethlehem’*, as WB Yeats says, creatures of dust and mud and death reaching toward a light we do not even know. In our Puritan tradition, it is only by the grace of God that we receive the Holy Spirit and thus have any understanding at all of what is really going on - that God wishes to claim us for God’s kingdom and the work of Christ in the world. It is like, as the Puritans say, being wrenched out of one environment, like a fish yanked out of the water, and being thrown into a wholly (holy) other environment - one of Spirit and air and fire and life. It is a violent, radical and powerful alteration of our fundamental being to be brought into the light of God.

Just as Adam comes to life when God breathes the breath of life into his nostrils (Gen 2:7), so also do the disciples come to life when Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into them in our reading today. In this moment, Jesus gives the disciples the power to do as he has done.

*Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘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.’ (Jn 20:22-23).*

The disciples are given the power to forgive those who confess their sins, for in God’s love for us, God seeks the forgiveness of all who would come before the Lord with a contrite heart. They are also given the power to retain the sins of those among you. I take ‘retaining of sins’ to mean to do what Christ also did. For those who cannot, will not or are unable to confess their sin, the disciples are to take those sins on as their own, to retain them, just as Jesus did on the Cross.

Do you see what is happening here with the reception of the Holy Spirit? For it is the full reception of the Holy Spirit that we celebrate today in Pentecost. The Holy Spirit comes as promised to the disciples in the room in Jerusalem.

*When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place.<sup>2</sup>And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.<sup>3</sup>And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them.<sup>4</sup>And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1-4)*

The Holy Spirit gives the same power to the disciples as Jesus had in his earthly ministry. The entire book of Acts is an account of how, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples are like Jesus Christ in his ministry. They do miracles; they heal the sick; they preach to thousands and bring them to baptism and faith; they bring the Holy Spirit to the world. This is why Jesus says in the Gospel of John,

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. (John 14:12).*

In the reception of the Holy Spirit, the disciples are becoming *like Christ*. In becoming like Christ, they are becoming fully human and fully divine. So now you can see why it matters that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples are becoming like Christ. And so do we, when we receive the Holy Spirit. Once we are claimed by the Holy Spirit, which is our personal Pentecost, we are formed in the image of Christ. We become an analogy to Christ, meaning we are *like him, but are not him*. We are formed in and by the Holy Spirit to be Christ-like. Whereas Jesus Christ *is God*, by the grace of God through the power of the Holy Spirit, we become *like God, whom we know through Jesus Christ*. What Jesus is by nature, we are by adoption and acceptance.

Paul says it this way:

*In the same way we also, when we were children, we were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.<sup>4</sup>But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,<sup>5</sup>to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.<sup>6</sup>And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”<sup>7</sup>So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Galatians 4:3-7)*

Notice that this happens as a group. The receiving of the Holy Spirit is not an individual thing; it is in relationship to the gathered disciples. *They* receive the Holy Spirit together, as if they were one body. 1 Corinthians 12 says,

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:4-7)*

It is not just that one of us is being transformed and formed into the image of Christ by the Holy Spirit; it is that all of together are manifesting the Spirit for the common good. This is why we gather together. The Spirit is not divided among us individually, rather the power of the Holy Spirit is increased and made known to each of us by the work of the community of believers in the world. *We*, as the people of God, are becoming like Christ. *We*, as the Body of Christ, are becoming fully human and fully divine. Not just me; not just you; but all of us together. The Resurrection we celebrated at Easter becomes the witness of who we are in Christ as the people of God at Pentecost. Christ becomes fully human and fully divine to us in his Resurrection. We become more like Christ, more fully human and fully divine, when we receive the Holy Spirit.

We today affirm that we, as Christ's followers, have received the Holy Spirit whom Jesus has sent to us, as if we also were in that same room with the disciples all those many years ago. And if we believe this to have been true for the disciples 2000 years ago, then for those of us who have been baptized into the Holy Spirit, we need to accept it is also true for us. For those who have not been baptized in the Holy Spirit, then just as Peter did all those years ago by inviting thousands to be baptized and to receive the Holy Spirit, know you also are invited to receive the Holy Spirit, here in this church, in this body of those who believe. For through the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, we have been given the power of Christ to forgive others by the grace and love of God for the sake of God's grace and love. And we have also been given the power to take on, to retain the sins of those who cannot, will not or are unable to accept forgiveness, so that God's love may complete the healing, the promise and the joy God intends for all of God's creation. For we are indeed, by the power of the Holy Spirit, becoming fully human and fully divine, just as Christ was. Just as Christ was and is, so we are becoming because we have, like the disciples, received the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*