

The Feast of Pentecost

We believe in one God, revealed in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Today is the feast day upon which we celebrate the third person of the Holy Trinity—perhaps the most elusive one. *We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and Son is worshipped and glorified.*

Listen with me for a Word of the Lord from the texts that are put before us today. The reading from Acts speaks of the Spirit as like *the rush of a violent wind*. We know how powerful the wind can be—and while the Spirit may sometimes feel like a cool summer breeze that’s not how it’s described in Acts. It stirs things up, pushes people out of their comfort zones, whirls about like a tornado, before there is a kind of United Nations’ experience of many different languages being spoken. The Spirit brings understanding, breaking down walls that divide. Notice there are both Arabs and Jews there when the winds of change begin to blow. Imagine the many different “tribes” where there is conflict in our time and you have a sense of what that first reading is about. Think Palestinian and Israeli, North Korean and Taiwanese and Chinese and Iranian and Iraqi and American and Sudanese and Liberian and Chilean—all in one place. And then imagine a process of reconciliation where each is heard sharing his or her dreams and visions, as the Spirit beckons to the dawn of a new day and new possibilities.

The Psalmist speaks in a more existential way: our very breath is of God. When that breath—that *ruah* of God is taken away—we die. It is as simple as that. The difference between life and death is in our breathing. And so as Anna Nalick puts it, “cradle your head in your hands [and] breathe—just breathe.” If you want to find God then you don’t have to look far; look within. Learn from the Buddhists who also remind us to just breathe—in and out. That same Spirit of the living God, says the Psalmist, is at work in the creation as a whole, not just in each creature. The Spirit is unleashed and springtime comes and the face of the earth is renewed. The Spirit hovers over all things to make them new again.

St. Paul reminds us in today’s epistle reading that it is the Spirit who is there to help us in our weakness. When we can’t pray, or feel we can’t pray—when we are out of words and maybe even without hope, and our sighs are too deep for words: the Spirit is there. The Spirit intercedes, to use the big theological word. The Spirit intervenes to act on our behalf, calling us back to the God who has created us in love as Abba, and redeemed us in love through Jesus.

Finally, in John’s Gospel, the imagery used comes from the legal profession. The Spirit is our Advocate, Jesus says. The Advocate leads us into the truth. Notice that Jesus is clear: while he is no doubt the Way, the Truth, and the Life we always see the Truth through a glass darkly, and the journey is a kind of never-ending story. God is not finished yet—not with us, not with the Church, not with creation. Those who claim to possess the truth—the whole truth and nothing but the truth (and by implication suggest that those who disagree therefore have no truth) miss this point. At best we are moving in the right direction, guided by the Spirit, and we do that not in isolation but within the community where we are both loved and challenged.

What I want you to notice is that while there are no doubt connections between these four readings—these four ways of speaking of the Spirit—there are not all identical. One of the most

important lessons we can learn in reading the Bible is to see and to celebrate that it represents a *community* of voices—that the “word of the Lord” is not one-dimensional but pluralistic and multi-cultural. It’s like a chorus singing four part harmony: they are all singing about the Spirit but they aren’t all singing the same notes.

That reality is liberating and beautiful to many, and yet at some level it is also a little bit scary, too. There is a part of most of us, I suspect, that wants to know the “right answer.” To reduce the Trinity to a formula—each person to a mini-creed. Is the Spirit “a,” “b,” or “c?” If the answer is “d”—all of the above—that can feel a little bit disconcerting.

So does the Spirit come as Comforter or as the one who pushes us out of our comfort zones? As Mighty Wind or as Gentle Breath? What if the answer is in fact “all of the above?”

That makes community messy. Many of you have heard me say before that I just laugh when people talk about “organized religion” because I don’t really have any experience with what they are talking about. Most faith communities I’ve been a part of really haven’t been all that organized. They are often chaotic. They often take one step forward and a half-step back. They begin to move this way and then a new vestry comes in and there is a mid-course correction. Someone suggests a new hymnal and there is experimentation with new music and then someone else says “can’t we have a little more of that old time religion?” And so it goes...

The only way any of it makes any sense to me whatsoever is to say that somehow the Spirit is at work in the midst of all the mess—all of the chaos—ordering it when necessary, but just as often stirring the pot when things get too settled and comfortable. My experience of the Spirit is that She never rests. Above all, She keeps life interesting—keeps the Church ever new—keeps it alive, gives it its breath—keeps us moving toward the dawn of a new day.

I have a little framed card in my office, given to me by the head of the pre-school Graham attended when I was the Associate Rector of Christ and Holy Trinity Church in Westport, CT. It pretty much sums up my philosophy of parenting:

There are two things parents can give their children—
roots and wings.

I wonder if that isn’t true about the Church’s calling as well—that a parish church is meant also to give us both roots and wings. We teach our children the stories of the faith—we ground them in a tradition that goes back not only to the communities we heard about today in Jerusalem and in Rome and elsewhere, but further back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—back to the very beginnings of God calling a pilgrim people. The Church is a place with very deep roots.

But the Holy Spirit—sometimes imagined as a dove—reminds us that discipleship is about learning to fly. Following Jesus is about learning to trust God enough to soar like an eagle, knowing and trusting the wind to blow us where it will, to blow us where we need to go.

© The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson, June 4, 2006