

May 30, 2004/Pentecost Sunday
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Community of the Spirit

Acts 2:1-21 *Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.*

I want to share three dimensions of our life as Jesus' community that I see in this story of what is called the birth of the church. If indeed this is the birth story of the church, then we can find in it the essential nature of the church as a community that lives by the Spirit of God.

Together in One Place

The text says: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." At his ascension, Jesus told the disciples to go back to Jerusalem and wait. They would "receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon" them and they would be his witnesses throughout the world (1:8).

"They were all together in one place." A simple statement with profound meaning. God's Spirit is not in our control. But there are conditions that make us receptive to the movement of God's Spirit. They are (1) that we are together and (2) that we wait together. We need to be together, to be in community. We need to make a commitment to be together with others who are giving themselves to following Christ. Christian life is not solitary. It is communal. If we are not willing to be in community with others, with all the challenges and struggles it brings, then we will not really experience the power of God's Spirit. We will keep holding onto our separateness and our illusions about others and ourselves. We will keep searching in vain for ideal persons and communities rather than the real persons and communities that Christ calls and loves.

That is why small groups are so important and why our church has worked over the years with the model of mission groups. The Spirit of God works in our lives when we are in a small community of those committed to one another, to Christ, and to a particular vision for ministry. And when we come together for worship, we need to come with the desire to be with one another and not as separate individuals coming into this room to remain separate individuals. The silence that we have prior to the beginning of the service is preparation for making that transition from individualism and separateness to awareness of and communion with others with whom we worship. It is part of the preparation for the coming of the Spirit of God.

The disciples are together praying and waiting with expectancy. As people committed to a life led and shaped by the Spirit, we need to learn to pray and wait expectantly. Everything presses us to spring into action, for there is so much to do, there are so many needs to meet. But if we live by the Spirit, we become aware of a deep interconnectedness to life—God. And if we are to be fully alive and truly helpful, then we need to know our place in that interconnectedness. We need to wait until we sense God's leading, what it is that God wants us to do and be for the sake of the world and our own fulfillment. Waiting and praying are the practices of being

fully present so that we can hear God's call and sense the movement and leading of God's Spirit in our lives.

Praying and waiting expectantly are essential for any mission group. It is tempting to push things, to force solutions and "make something happen." A mission group may have to wait months, even years, for God to work out the mission through them. But this is not "doing nothing"; it is the hard work of the group's inward journey, remaining faithful to the vision that gave birth to the group, living more deeply into one another's lives, paying attention to all the little things that can be done in preparation for the "big things." This faithfulness to expectant prayer and waiting will open up the way that God wants for the group, which is not always what the group imagined it might be.

Yesterday morning we met at the Festival Center for the children's program. We have worked for many weeks preparing for children to come into the Center and become a part of its life. Some weeks we were there by ourselves, looking out the windows longingly for children to come trooping up to the Center. When no children came, we prayed and waited and did the little things that would, we hope, prepare the ground—meeting with neighborhood leaders, walking the streets delivering fliers, sending out mailings. Finally, there were three children. These three helped us to get our feet wet and began to teach us. Yesterday just before 10:00 a.m., we had a time of silence and prayer, preparing ourselves for no children or our faithful three. A few minutes after ten, they started coming in until we had eight children! We were overwhelmed, in all senses of the word! I realized that all of the waiting, praying, and preparing had been part of the way God's Spirit works with us so that we are able to do God's work. I remembered the moments of worry, anxiousness, and sometimes sleeplessness, wondering if this vision we believed we were given by God would ever be realized or turn out to be just a wish-dream, something we cooked up in our own minds. The important thing is that we are learning how prayer and patient waiting are essential to receiving the leading and power of God's Spirit.

Patience is hard. Pema Chodron writes: "Patience takes courage. It is not an ideal state of calm." [Comfortable with Uncertainty, p. 138] Being together, waiting and praying may seem like "doing nothing," but it is the work of making ourselves open to God, to others, to the world, and to our true, real selves. It is a courageous struggle with our impulses to get on with it, our tendencies to be driven by our inner turmoils and our activism. Waiting and prayer allow our inner life to settle down, becoming quiet and empty enough of our fears, anxiousness and preoccupations to sense the movement of God's Spirit when it happens.

Fire on Our Heads

"And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them."

I love this picture! Luke chose just the right words and images to describe the presence and movement of God's Spirit. The sound of a violent wind. A tongue of fire resting on each head. One Spirit manifesting itself in diverse and unique ways. The way of the Spirit is not conforming to what we think others want us to be

or abandoning our uniqueness so that we can be like another person, group or church. The God's Spirit works in diversity. Each of us has a tongue of fire on our head. God's Spirit rests upon us to ignite and illuminate our lives. The work of our spiritual life is to become aware of the flame that rests on our head as individuals and as a community of faith. This is the work of knowing and affirming our uniqueness, our own gifts and our own limitations. We have to quit the joy-killing search for perfection in which we are constantly measuring ourselves against something or someone else. Discovering and being who God made us is discovering the flame of the Spirit resting on our heads.

This tongue of flame rests on our head as a community. The Church of the Covenant is a unique community of persons God has called together in Christ to be together in faithfulness and ministry. This uniqueness includes Covenant Members and all who are part of this community. I think that there is a challenge for us, however. It is the challenge to find out and affirm this very uniqueness. It seems to me that there is a tendency to see yourselves as a copy of another church, the Church of the Saviour in D.C. The Church of the Saviour has provided a powerful vision and model for the church that wants to really BE the community of Christ. The emphases of commitment, spiritual discipline, call to mission, and depth community are essential for any such church. However, when we have such a model, it is easy to fall into the trap of trying to BE that other community, that other church, and to measure oneself against it. We have to do the spiritual work of self-discovery and self-affirmation, looking at who WE are, what God has made US. And if we are truly living by God's Spirit, then we will be unlike any other community. That's the way God's Spirit works.

Comparison is the death of the spiritual life and it is the death of any community of faith. Trying to be another person or community is the abandoning of our own reality and thus God's Spirit that works only within the reality of who we are. We need to take those vital elements of community spiritual life seriously—commitment, spiritual discipline, mission—but always within our own reality, the uniqueness of our community and its situation and setting. If we try to replicate another church, we are dead in the water. But if we are always opening our eyes to see who WE really are and what God is making of US, which will always be something different from others, then we are on our way to revitalization in God's Spirit.

When we begin to discover that tongue of flame that is resting on our heads as individuals and as a community, then we will begin to live as though our hair were on fire!

Dreams and Visions

Finally, Peter gets up to make a speech. All the people witnessing this strange thing are buzzing, wondering what it's all about. Some conclude that these disciples have been hitting the sauce! But Peter sets it right. These are not drunk with wine. After all, it's only nine in the morning! But there is another kind of way to get drunk. There is another way to experience the high of connection and flow in life. There is another way to see life aglow with meaning and purpose. And it is a

real way, a way that comes from our connection with reality, with the God who made the world and us, whose Spirit is with us and moves in and through us.

Peter quotes the prophet Joel. In the last days God will pour out the Spirit on all flesh, on the whole of creation. Your children will prophesy; they will speak God's vital and truth-filled word. Your young people will see visions and your old people will dream dreams. Those on the lowest rungs of life will know and speak God's truth.

The community of Christ is a birthing place for the dreams and visions of God in the hearts and minds of people. Children. Youth. Young and middle adults. Old people. The visions and dreams of God for the world can be born in anyone who will open himself or herself to them. It happens that children are more open than we are and we need to pay attention to what children tell us about the world and what is needed. As we grow up, unfortunately the capacity for dreaming the dreams of God and being afire with the visions of God is diminished by our socialization. The church itself becomes a place of deadening structures and joyless formalities rather than the spawning place of God's dreams and visions.

Each of us, no matter what our age or stage in life, can be those who see visions of how life can manifest God's dream, the kingdom of God. I think that the most under-exercised part of our spirit is our imagination, this capacity to see look at life as it is and how life is meant by God to be. Then we are able to follow our imaginations, the dreams and visions God puts in our spirits, with faithfulness, commitment, and the using of our gifts.

A part of this church's uniqueness is that you have valued this kind of faithful imagination. Bev Cosby was a person gifted with dreaming and envisioning. His "gospel imagination" ignited many ministries in this city. However, having dreams and visions cannot be the domain of only the designated leader of the community. Every one of us needs to exercise our God-created capacity for dreaming God's dreams, for holding in our hearts and following with our lives the visions God gives us for renewing and enriching the life of God's world.

Prayer and waiting expectantly.

Becoming aware of the tongue of flame resting on our heads as persons and as a community.

Exercising our "gospel imagination" and dreaming the dreams and envisioning the visions of God for the life of the world.

In these things lies the movement of God's Spirit and our vitality as a community of God's Spirit.