

Your Hair's On Fire

Psalm 104:24-35 ... *when you send forth your spirit, they are created...*

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

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

A Flame on Our Heads

The story of Pentecost is full of rich images that spark our spiritual imaginations. How could you describe the invisible spirit of God except by some visual images that themselves evoke mystery and power? The spirit comes from God, thus is pictured as a “violent wind” rushing into the room where the disciples have been waiting as Jesus told them to do. The spirit of God is always spoken of in scripture as wind or breath. It comes, it goes. It gives life to creation. It is real and essential to our lives, yet invisible, imperceptible and uncontrollable. It can only be felt or sensed in our hearts, our minds, our spirits.

How could you picture this spirit as it relates to Jesus' followers, his church, unless you had something like flames of fire moving among them and dividing off, one flame resting on the head of each disciple? The story is meant to wake us up to God's spirit that is given to ignite in each of us and together the life Jesus manifested. The Holy Spirit is God's power, guidance, enlightenment, and encouragement touching our lives individually and together.

I like the picture of a tongue of fire resting on each disciple's head. We are Jesus' disciples, his community, and we are trying to live the life he revealed and taught, the life of communion with God and others and the creation itself in the harmony of love. So there is a tongue of fire resting on each of our heads. It's there whether we've noticed or not, whether we “feel” it or not. It came with our baptism, with our commitment to follow Jesus. It is God's empowering response to our willingness to walk this journey.

I once heard someone describe another person this way: “She lives like her hair is on fire.” I'd never heard that before and it broke me up! Perfect! There are some people like that, for whom life is one big challenge, one big interesting adventure, who throw themselves into life with everything they have. And that odd image fit perfectly, to my mind, this business of our having a flame on our heads, the fire of God's spirit.

Are we aware that there is a flame on our heads? Are we living as though our hair is on fire? I'm not talking about being enthusiastic in the superficial sense, about having bubbly and optimistic personalities. A person can be very spirit-filled and yet move very slowly and thoughtfully through life, not rushing around all the time. In seminary there were debates about whether one should preach from a manuscript or from brief notes on cards. The assumption was that if you read from a manuscript, the sermon was not very “spirit-filled.” I never thought that made sense. There were one or two of my professors whose well-prepared, typed-out, carefully thought-out lectures

seemed far more spirit-filled than some of the boisterous sermons we endured in chapel.

I think that living as persons with a tongue of fire on our heads means that the spiritual life is very real for us and we make it front and center. It is something we take seriously. It means that we simply yet carefully pay attention to our lives and how we live them. Are we living as those who constantly seek to live out of our relationship with the living God? Are we spiritually hungry, or have we grown self-satisfied, no longer seeking to deepen our relationship with God or our faithfulness to Christ in the present moment? Are we waking up each day, really waking up? Or are we sleepwalking? The spiritual life is living with our hair on fire. Let's look at what this means and can mean.

We ARE God's Gift to the World

To live as though our hair were on fire, to live with that tongue of flame on our head, means to live with the growing conviction of our value and worth in God's eyes. God accepts and affirms us as we are in order that we may become what we truly are. The spirit touches our lives with a confirmation that we are exactly who God made us to be and to become. We know our “place” and occupy that place with commitment, conviction, and care. We know that we are a gift to the world and we work at living that way.

When I was at First Christian Church, I pulled into the gas station one day and was filling the tank. The mother of one of the children in the church came up to me from her car. “You know what my daughter just said?” she asked. “When she saw you get out of your car, she said, ‘Look, Mom. There's God.’” Since then I've discovered that every minister has had this experience with a child. That doesn't take away from how special the incident was for me. It tells me that children, on one level, identify the minister with God because she or he is the one always talking about God. But at a deeper level, children see us for who we really are. They see the best in us and they bring that out. That's why I want to hang around children. They remind me of who I really am, down deep, and it makes me want to live up to that.

Many of us don't live as though we know we are God's gift to the world. We struggle with bouts of depression, feelings of worthlessness or boredom or futility. We shy away from our own lives because we find much there that is painful and hard to face. So we look to someone else or to another community to fulfill us; any green pasture outside our own lives will do. We try to be like someone else. Or we build up some acceptable image of ourselves in our heads and imagine that somehow we are like that. But it doesn't work for long. We keep bumping into who we really are and the necessity, sooner or later, of living the life we have, warts and all.

That's the point at which we can discover the tongue of fire that rests on our own head. The life we have, the life we ARE is exactly the life God has given us to live. We may have terrible experiences in our lives and be tempted to bitterness and anger. We can spend our lives being jealous or angry because others seem to have it easier. But that is still not living our own lives. It is not finding the flame of spirit that burns precisely in those places where we hurt or grieve or feel anger. If we are not working with those things in our inward journeys with compassion and understanding, then we end up being preoccupied

with everyone else's life but our own, either bitter toward them or trying to fix them and thus making ourselves feel useful.

The tongue of fire, the spirit of God resting on our heads, is God's affirmation of and presence with us as we are. That spirit invites us to go deeper, to find the healing, peace, strength, and hope we need to live with greater wholeness and freedom and joy. We learn how to stop avoiding the difficult things or wishing they would simply disappear. We learn embrace them just as God has embraced them in love. In short, to live as though our hair were on fire means to be discovering with growing depth and confidence that we ARE gifts from God to the world, just as we are and also as we are coming to be.

We HAVE Gifts to Offer

To live with that tongue of flame on our head also means knowing that we have at least one gift to share with the world. This is where the lectionary reading this week from 1 Corinthians 12 comes in. To each and every one is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good. To discover our gift or gifts is finding what we're in this life to be, to do, to give. It is not being "gifted" the way that word has been co-opted in public education—separating the most advantaged and accomplished kids from the others. In the spiritual view, there are not "the gifted" and those who are not. All are gifted. It's just a matter of finding out what our gift is and helping each other do the same.

What is a gift but the particular way our life comes alive when we are doing it. I was talking with Judy Bork the other night and she was telling me about the work she is doing now with her photography, making note cards with some of the flower pictures she has taken. She told me how others immediately want to buy her cards when they see them. Working with photography and words like this, as she said, "flicks my Bic." So we need to be about discovering and affirming and focusing on what it is that flicks our Bics. Because there is an excellent chance that what gives life to us when we're doing it is the very thing that gives life to the world in some way. It is a channel of God's spirit moving into the world.

What is it that I can do to give life to this community of faith? What gift am I to exercise in such a way that it increases the common good? Am I making the important transition from what I am getting out of the community to what I am giving? I'm not talking about "big deals" but "little deals." Sometimes we distract ourselves by the assumption that a gift is something big and obvious. The gift is whatever God has given us to share that benefits the life and ministry of the church, that gives life to the world around us. Sometimes we become overwhelmed by the great needs of society and the world. The big picture looms so large that we feel utterly powerless to do anything. We get discouraged and quit thinking about our gifts. It just seems too petty and small and self-centered.

We are to start where we are with who we are and what we are given to do. If we start there, which is local and small, who knows what the impact will be or whether or not it will remain small? We aren't supposed to start by assessing whether or not we think our gift makes a difference or not, whether or not it is important. We just start by finding it, sharing it, and giving ourselves to

it. If we are exercising our gift in that way, we will be the sorts of persons who call forth the gifts of others. It all begins with our living as those whose hair is on fire! We live as though our lives matter because they DO matter!

Our Gift/The World's Need

Another thing Judy said the other night. She is struggling with how to connect her gift for photography and words and design with the needs of the world. Here is where the creative struggle comes in for us. Here is where our "Gospel imaginations" come into play, seeing how our gift can touch the world with the Good News of God's love in Christ. The tongues of flame rested on each disciple that day in order for them to communicate this Good News of God's steadfast and transforming love for the world. And all I am saying here is that we have the capacity to become aware of our gifts and the needs of the world in such a way that we see the connections. As I said earlier, simply exercising our gift IS meeting some point of the world's need, a need that perhaps we don't even perceive. Yet there may be some way we can sharpen the focus, make the connection more specific toward some particular need. That's where our times of meditation and prayer come in. A part of our inward journey is shining upon our lives the light of imagination. This is also the work of God's spirit in us. We see our gifts. We see the needs around us, in the community of faith itself and in the world around us. And we begin to perceive connections. We begin to see how and where we are being called to use our gifts for the healing and upbuilding of life.

It Never Stops

One final word. After the wind and fire business, Peter gets up to preach to the crowd that has gathered because they see something going on. He begins with a quote from the prophet Joel about young people and old people dreaming dreams and having visions. It never stops. It doesn't depend on how difficult or easy our lives are at a particular time. I have known many people who have discovered the flame on their heads during the most painful of experiences, when they HAD to go deeper into life, into their own spirits, when the easy and superficial no longer held up and their struggles opened up life in a deeper and more real way.

Living with our hair on fire is not dependent on age. If we fall into the trap of thinking the life of courageous faith belongs to younger folks while we ourselves begin to retire from it, then we have bought into the lies of our culture. Joel says the old and young alike will dream dreams and have visions. No, we may not have the same energy as before and we may have some physical impairment that is real and limiting. But we still have that infernal flame on our heads! It won't go away. So our challenge is really the same as it has always been—how are we to stay alive in God's spirit? What is God calling me to do at this point in my life? What is the gift God is giving me in this season of life? What can I share now that will benefit my community of faith and enrich life around me? I may be older. I may have difficulties I didn't have before. I may be entering the last chapter of my earthly life. But what does it mean that I still have this flame on my head? What does it mean now that my hair is still on fire?