

Living by the Spirit

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b *When you send forth your spirit, they are created....*

Acts 2:1-13 *Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.*

Romans 8:14-17 *For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.*

John 14:12-14, 25-27 *“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”*

Today is Pentecost Sunday. We are to become mindful of God’s spirit empowering and leading us as Jesus’ community. I want to comment briefly on three of today’s readings and the thread running through them--God’s spirit as the life energy of the whole creation and of our lives as people of faith.

The Spirit/Breath of God

Psalm 104 is a panoramic view of the whole creation drawing its life from God’s spirit. The visible world around us, and including us, is the very expression of that unseen power we call the spirit of God. All creatures, including us human creatures, receive life from the creating and sustaining spirit of God that runs through all creation.

Throughout scripture, the physical and the spiritual are bound intimately together, not separated. All creatures look to God for their sustenance, physically and spiritually. As human beings we are woven into the fabric of the creation, not separate and apart, not over against the world of nature. These days we surely must be relearning this interconnectedness of life. This ancient view of reality, shared by the wisest of spiritual traditions everywhere, must be reclaimed and lived.

I am reading a marvelous book entitled LAST CHILD IN THE WOODS by Richard Jouv, a journalist and advocate for children. The book shows undeniably how crucial it is that children and all of us maintain direct experience with nature. It is essential for us physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. That connection with nature has been and is being lost for today’s children, diminishing their spiritual, emotional, and intellectual life. As I read this important book, I see how fortunate we are to have here the components that enable us to help children and ourselves keep and nourish that connection with the creation. This property with its unique woods. Camp Kum Ba Yah, with its summer and year-round environmental programs. The Festival Center connecting us with the central city and with the children there. And the Chrysalis

Interfaith Retreat Center. These comprise for us an overall mission to be focused on and nourishing of our essential connection with the creation. No mission is more critical in today’s world.

In the psalm the creatures seem to know how to live as God made them. They have no problem being who they are, receiving their life and their death from God. With us human creatures the situation is different. We have a problem living as we were made to live. We are the only species that perpetuates war among ourselves, carrying out brutality on each other with intricate justifications, often religious, for our violence. We are the only creature that destroys its own home, which we also justify by the short-sightedness of profit and maintaining lifestyles that are the very source of our own destruction.

The whole of scripture might be read as an exploration of our disconnectedness from our created nature--a good definition of sin--and the journey of becoming reunited with our true humanity in God. Psalm 104 is only one portion that can help us reawaken to our unity with all of creation through the spirit of God.

God’s Adoptive Love Brings Us Home

The apostle Paul sees in Jesus the recovery of our true humanity. As we share in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we live our way into our true nature as God’s children. For Paul it is about becoming spirit-led, waking up to and living out of God’s spirit in us. He says that all who are led by the spirit of God are children of God. Paul knows that we are already God’s children, created by God. But he also knows that we have neglected or lost touch with our created nature. So becoming those who are led by God’s spirit is our re-creation, our re-orientation so that we begin living the way we were made to live.

In Christ we receive God’s spirit afresh so that we can really live as God’s children. Living by the spirit brings freedom, freedom from fear. Paul understands fear as the root of our neglectful and forgetful ways of living. Fear of each other, fear of the world, fear of ourselves. Out of our fears we create all sorts of problems for ourselves and life around us. Competition. Violence. Greed. Destructive attachments to things we think will make us secure. We live in a clinging and possessive way, trying to keep a tight grip on others, the world, and ourselves. But it doesn’t work. We only become more fearful, more isolated from each other, more alienated from the creation, more violent toward others and ourselves.

You did not receive a spirit of slavery, says Paul, but a spirit of adoption. The spirit of God brings us home to our true selves. Paul is deeply convinced that God’s love continually chooses us again and again. It is like adoption. When Kaye and I adopted our son Kent, we began to learn this particular kind of love. Of course we loved both Kent and our birth child Shelley just as deeply. With Kent, however, it was a matter of choosing to love, to bring him to our home so that it would become his home. Such love that chooses to love over and over again dissolves our fears as we become inwardly convinced that we have a home that will never be taken away from us.

The Holy Spirit Paul and Jesus talk about is not a different spirit from God's spirit that is given to all of creation. It is God's spirit given to us as human beings so that we are renewed and reclaimed in our true created nature. For Paul receiving this spirit liberates us from fear, the main reason that we abandon our created nature.

God's Spirit, Our Advocate

From John's gospel we have a portion of Jesus' farewell words to his disciples before his death. First, Jesus tells his disciples that even though he is leaving them, it's okay. They will continue to do the very same things he has been doing. They may even do greater things! This is an amazing statement. Jesus doesn't see us as hopeless and helpless sinners who can do nothing of worth. He assumes we can live the same way he lived and do even greater things. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called people the light of the world and the salt of the earth. When he preached his main message—repentance so that we live as part of God's dawning reign on earth—he assumed we have the capacity to repent, to change our way of living, our patterns of thinking, to get a new perspective and viewpoint, and enter into own transformation.

I think that we need to let this sink deeply in to our minds and hearts. As Jesus leaves his disciples he does not bind them to himself to become a "Jesus Memorial Society," forever grieving his departure from them. He is empowering them to be the people he believes they truly are as God's children. We can do the same work Jesus was about—reconciling, peacemaking, justice bringing, life restoring, loving. Our lives can be a source of strength, healing, and encouragement to others just as Jesus' life was. Jesus is saying: Look, you can live the same life I have lived, and don't be surprised if you do even greater things.

I don't claim to know what exactly that means. I don't believe it means that we are to build great empires of religion and exert our egos over others. I don't believe it means we will do things that draw attention to ourselves in a grandiose way. That is not the servant spirit of Jesus. I think Jesus is saying that who we are and whatever we do out of our love of God and God's creation, human and non-human alike, is decisively important. When we live as those led by God's spirit, when we are working with our own lives and their transformation into our true identity as God's children, we are touching life around us in ways that channel God's own spirit and love. Nothing that we do is small.

In all of this Jesus says that we have the spirit of God as our Advocate. The word here (*paraklesis*) means helper, one who takes our side, who encourages us. The spirit of God we receive as Jesus' disciples and his community works in and among us in particular ways that help us. Jesus says that the spirit will teach us everything we need to know. If we are attentive to this spiritual connection we have with God, if we work to keep our minds and hearts open to God's creating, sustaining, and guiding spirit, we will learn all that we need to know along the way. Also God's spirit will keep us reminded of Jesus' life and teachings. In this way, Jesus continues to be with us as the living Christ.

God's Spirit and the New Community

Finally, the story of Pentecost from the Acts of the Apostles shows us a group of Jesus' followers gathered together waiting and keeping themselves open. This group experiences the spirit of God blowing into, through and among them, touching each one with power. It is the power to be a human community the way God made us to be, led by the spirit of God, aware of our relationship with God, and seeking to live together and in the world as people who know God as the creator and sustainer of all life.

Pentecost is not the birth of an institution called the church. It is the story of what happens when we come together in the spirit of Jesus Christ, recognize in him our true humanity, and open ourselves up to be filled with and led by God's spirit, the same spirit that breathes life into us every moment, every day. This new community of God's spirit does not seek to perpetuate itself or build itself up or make a name for itself. This new community simply seeks day in and day out to be open to God's spirit and to each other in love. Such groups, no matter how small or poor or wounded by the world, will end up doing all that Jesus did, sometimes even greater things.