

May 27, 2012 / Pentecost Sunday / David L. Edwards

Your Hair Is On Fire

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

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

The story of Pentecost is full of vibrant images. The spirit of God is a “violent wind” rushing into the room where the disciples have been waiting as Jesus told them to do. God's spirit is pictured in scripture as sometimes wind, sometimes breath. It comes, it goes. It gives life to all creatures, including us humans (Ps. 104). The spirit stirs up awareness of who we are in God and what God is giving us to be and do. The spirit is experienced in community as we strive together in discipleship to Jesus. Out of this story, I mention three ways we experience God's spirit.

The spirit of God is given in community and for community. The story begins with the disciples being "all together in one place." Community is the context in which we receive God's spirit, being a community that practices silence and inner listen and an openness to the spirit. This was the vision of the Church of the Covenant from the beginning--the call to be a community of persons committing themselves to following Jesus and to one another in this place. Working faithfully together with that commitment positions us to receive God's spirit.

This is not the dominant pattern of life. Our culture is highly individualistic and transient. We are always on the move to get what we want out of life. It is rare to find persons who seek to make a commitment to be together with others in one place. That seems stagnant, "going nowhere." And yet, living a migratory life perpetuates a deep loneliness and unfulfillment. We are unable to be in relationships over time or to become part of a "place" in a life-giving way. We go from person to person, from place to place, always disappointed, never content with where we are or who we are with, lured on by the mirage of life always seeming better somewhere else.

The spirit of God is given to the community as it waits together in one place. I think that is a wonderful image for us as a faith community. Our inward journey, as persons and a community, is to always be waiting for God's spirit. Together. In this place. That means our outward life becomes less conformed to the dominant

migratory pattern of life. We renew daily our commitment to be together in this place, open to God's spirit. And as we do this, we experience God's spirit moving in, among, and through us. Instead of living on the surface, we begin to discover the depth, meaning, and true nature of life.

Being in community is one of the greatest challenges of life! When we stop running around looking for perfect people, a perfect place, and all of that, we begin to discover and embrace the reality of others and ourselves. We learn what it really means to love others and ourselves through understanding and acceptance. In a community of commitment and openness to God's loving spirit, we find the sustenance and power that helps us to grow and mature in love of others, ourselves, and the world. The challenge of community is real and can be difficult. Yet, as Thom Field writes in one of his songs, "It's only in community that we learn to love each other, and only in this unity does pretense acquire substance. To be God's be on earth, to be God's peace on earth." ("In Community", *Songs for the Journey*).

God's spirit manifests in diversity. One spirit is the life of all of us and of the whole creation. Yet that one spirit is expressed uniquely in each person and her gifts and calling. The story pictures this as flames of fire dividing off and resting on each disciple. This story wakes us up to God's spirit igniting in each of us the life of a child of God.

There is a tongue of fire resting on each one of us. It is there as we work with living the kind of life Jesus embodied and taught. It came with the awakening of our desire and commitment to follow Jesus. It came when we started looking at our lives with the question: What am I put on this earth to be and to do? What am I called and gifted to share in the service of life? When we begin to see our lives as a journey of faith and to take responsibility for our own lives, we receive a spirit of empowerment, guidance, and the energy of love for that journey. It is the flame on our head.

I once heard someone say this about another person: "She lives like her hair is on fire." I'd never heard that before, and it broke me up! There are some people like that, who throw themselves into life with everything they have, whether they HAVE much or little. They seem fully alive, fully awake, regardless of the circumstances of their lives. The story of Pentecost tells us that together and individually as Jesus' followers, our hair is on fire.

Do we know there is a flame on our heads? Are we living as though our hair is on fire? I don't mean being bubbly and optimistic. I don't mean being "fired up" all the

time. A spirit-filled and spirit-ignited person can move very slowly and thoughtfully through life, not rushing around all the time. A spirit-filled person might speak eloquently or be given more to silence. Paul spoke masterfully about that in 1 Cor. 12. There is one spirit. There are varieties of gifts. The one spirit works in different ways in different people. Being a "spiritual person" does not mean one thing. Our spiritual journeys are different, not the same. God's spirit means diversity, not uniformity. The fire of God's spirit looks different in your life than it does in mine. And yet, when we share our journeys with one another, we find a deep thread of connectedness. Our journeys are our own, but we are in this thing together!

When we are awakening and growing in awareness of our value and worth in God's eyes, our hair is on fire. When we stop comparing ourselves to others and embrace the uniqueness of our own lives, our hair is on fire. The spirit confirms that we are exactly who God made us to be and to become. We are coming to know and occupy our "place," our niche in life, with commitment, conviction, care, and joy. We stop trying to be like someone else or what others think we should be. We also stop demanding that others join us in OUR thing. We start discovering, taking responsibility for, and living the wondrous mystery of our own being.

Each of us is a gift of God to the world. Many of us don't really believe that. We struggle with bouts of depression, feelings of worthlessness or futility. We allow our insecurities and fears to dominate us. Our lives may be filled with things that are painful and hard to face. We try to be like someone else or run from place to place. Any greener pasture will do! But it doesn't work. Sooner or latter we have to live the life we have, warts and all.

That's exactly the point at which we find the tongue of fire on our own head. The life we have, the life we ARE is exactly the life God has given us to live. We embrace our life just as God has embraced us, in love. To live as though our hair is 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 as we are coming to be.

The spirit of God is given for mission. When God's spirit rushed in upon Jesus' community, it came with the momentum of mission, of reaching out, of communicating God's redemptive love. The Church of the Covenant was born out of the insight that the church exists for the sake of the world, not for itself. Around 1950, there was a small recreation program for children that arose from the question, "Where will the children play?" The gathering of these forty acres, parcel by parcel,

was a response to that question, so that here there would always be a place for children to play, to be outdoors, to know themselves as part of God's good creation. This grew over time to become what is now Camp Kum-Ba-Yah. An association was formed to support that mission. It was first called Lynchburg Christian Fellowship, later to become interfaith as Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship. To provide spiritual support for all of that, a small faith community came together as the Church of the Covenant. It has always been our understanding that God's spirit is given to us in community for the sake of ministries and missions enhancing the life of God's world.

God's spirit awakens us to what we are called and gifted to be and do for the sake of the world. Each of us has at least one gift to share. To discover our gift or gifts means finding what we're in this life to be, to do, to give. I'm not talking about "big deals" but "little deals." We get distracted by assuming that a gift is something big. The gift is whatever God has given us to share that benefits the life and ministry of the community itself or the world around us. We begin where we are with who we are and what we are given to do. We don't start by assessing whether or not we think our gift makes a difference or not. We just start by finding it, sharing it, and giving ourselves to it. And if we are exercising our gift in that way, we will be the sorts of persons who call forth the gifts of others.

One last thing. The spirit empowered Jesus' community that day to communicate with people of many languages. There were Jews living in Jerusalem from other nations and cultures. As the disciples spoke, each heard in his or her own language. There was no such thing as "English only"! Remember, the spirit of God works in diversity, not uniformity. Uniformity is death; diversity is life. I think this means that as Jesus' community, we need to be with all kinds of people, regardless of whether or not they see themselves as Christians, or even as "religious". I am excited about an informal group that has been meeting in the Lodge about every two months or so. It is a gathering of some from Camp KBY, from the Crofters Mission Group, the New Lodge Mission Group, and Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center, along with some who have become interested in this place and the emerging vision of being a teaching and learning earth-centered community. We touch a common thread of spirit regardless of whether or not we see ourselves as "religious". The Church of the Covenant has always seen itself in this way, not as trying to get people to speak our language, so to speak, but to speak and BE in ways that are leaven and light in the world, that nourish and share in things that bring life. It isn't about building up and

preserving the church. It is about living rightly in and serving God's world alongside the diversity of all who seek the same.

After the wind and fire business, Peter gets up to preach to the crowd. He believes that God's promise through the prophet Joel seems to have come about. God's spirit is poured out on all. You are never too old or too young. Your circumstances in life never limit or exclude you. We can all live as though our hair is on fire. In a community of God's love and spirit. And for the sake of the world.