

May 19, 2013 / Pentecost Sunday / David L. Edwards

### Community and the Spirit

Psalm 104 *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.*

If we look at Pentecost as the birth story of the church, then we can find in it the essential nature—the DNA, if you will—of the church as a community of Jesus' followers living and serving together in the Spirit and by the Spirit of God. I see three things in the story. There are surely more if we go deep enough.

#### Together in One Place

The story begins: “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” In the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, as the risen Jesus is about to ascend to God, he tells the disciples to go back to Jerusalem and wait. As they do that, they will “receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon” them, and they will be his witnesses throughout the world (1:8).

“They were all together in one place.” A simple and profound statement. There are conditions, or practices, that make us receptive to the presence and movement of the Spirit. We need to be in community, and we need to be able to wait. We make a commitment to be with others who are also on this inward and outward journey of faith. The life of faith 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 and misperceptions about others and ourselves. We will keep searching in vain for ideal persons and communities. We will never experience the challenges, the growth, and the deep joy that comes from being in community with others whom Jesus has called to embody his love.

Our community has worked over the years with this understanding of what it means to be the church. The Spirit of God works in our lives when we are in a small community of those committed to one another, to their own spiritual lives, and to particular visions for ministry to which they feel called. When we come together for worship, or to our mission group meetings, we need to bring a willingness to be with one another, to touch our deepest belonging to one another. The silence that we have prior to the beginning of the service, or in our mission groups, is for making the transition from our individualism and separateness to awareness of and communion with others, as well as God. In this way, we touch our unity in God's Spirit, and then open ourselves to that Spirit.

The disciples are together, waiting with expectancy. As people committed to a life led and shaped by the Spirit, we learn to pray and wait expectantly. Everything presses us to spring into action.

There is so much to do. There are so many needs to meet. Yet, if we live by the Spirit, we become aware of the deep interconnectedness of life. To be fully, authentically alive and truly helpful, we need to discern and know our place, our niche, in that interconnectedness, our calling and our gifts. As we grow in our capacity to wait with openness, we grow in sensitivity to God's leading, what it is that God wants us to do and be for the sake of the world and our own fulfillment. Prayerful waiting is the practice of being fully present, and of being empty and open enough to be the channels of what God seeks to do through us, as persons, as mission groups, as a community.

Praying and waiting expectantly are essential for mission groups. We want 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. This is not "doing nothing". It is the patient 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 prepare us to do the "big things." Faithfulness to prayerful waiting opens up the way that God wants for the group. It will enable the group to pay attention to the mission as it unfolds. The mission may not always be what the group imagined it might be. And it will surely evolve and change and grow, according to the Spirit. Prayerful waiting is paying attention to the Spirit's work.

Being in community, growing in our capacity for prayerful waiting. This kind of spiritual practice helps us calm our impulses to get on with it, our tendencies to be driven by our inner turmoils and our activism, rather than being led into the thing that is most needed and the best way of doing it. We become increasingly able to perceive and receive the energy, insight, and direction of the Spirit.

### 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 in community. The sound of a violent wind--this reawakens us to the reality that there is something bigger, deeper, wiser, and more powerful at work in this world than we are normally aware of. A tongue of fire resting on each head. One Spirit that manifests in diversity and uniqueness, not uniformity and conformity. We cannot live by the Spirit if we don't drop our habits of conforming to what we think others want us to be, or abandon our uniqueness by trying to be like another person, group, or church. Each of us has a tongue of fire on our head. 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 callings, 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. Being who God made us to be means discovering the

tongue of fire resting on our heads. It is the way we participate in the bigger picture of what God's Spirit is doing.

A flame rests on our head as a community. The Church of the Covenant is a unique (some might say quirky!), community of persons God has called to be together in faithfulness and ministry. We have the challenge of becoming aware of and embracing this uniqueness. Is easy to fall into the trap of trying to BE LIKE some other community, some other church, and to measure ourselves 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 and imitation mean spiritual death, for persons and communities. If we keep our attention on who God made US to be, then we are on our way to revitalization in God's Spirit.

Someone once described another person to me this way: She lives like her hair is on fire! I loved that. When we begin to discover that tongue of flame that is resting on our heads as persons and as a community, then we will begin to live as though our hair is on fire! And our life together needs to include helping one another perceive and affirm the particular flame that is upon our heads, and in our hearts. It is the calling forth of gifts—the gift of the person and the gifts she or he has to share.

### Dreams and Visions

Finally, Peter gets up to make a speech. Everything the disciples have been saying has been understood by everyone looking on, even though they speak different languages. A unity in understanding within a diversity of languages and cultures. How can this be, that we each hear in our own language? Some conclude that these disciples have been hitting the sauce! Peter gets down to it. These are not drunk. It's only nine in the morning! Besides, there is another way to 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 awakening to and connection with reality, with the God who made the world and us, whose Spirit breathes life into us, is with us, in us, and works through us.

Peter quotes the prophet Joel. God pouring out the Spirit on all flesh, on the whole of creation. Children prophesying, that is, telling us God's truth about things. Children do that, you know, IF we listen to them. There was a story recently about a child who wrote Vice President Biden that we need guns that shoot chocolate, not bullets. That is reality! That's truth! That pulls the cover off our insanity about guns and weapons and killing each other! Young people seeing visions, old people dreaming dreams. People everywhere knowing and speaking God's truth.

The community of Jesus is a birthing place for the dreams and visions of God, born in the hearts and minds of everyone, regardless of age or gender or status or anything else. The visions and dreams of God for the world can be born in anyone who will open herself to them. It happens that children are more open than we are. As we grow up, unfortunately the capacity for dreaming the dreams of God and being afire with the visions and energy of God are diminished by our socialization. The church itself

becomes a place of deadening structures and joyless formalities rather than the birthing place of God's dreams and visions.

Each of us, no matter what our age or stage in life, can 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 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 us, with faithfulness, commitment, and the using of our gifts. 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. This, too, is the work of the Spirit.

Being together in one place. Prayer and waiting expectantly. Becoming aware of the tongue of flame resting on our heads as persons and as a community. Exercising our spiritual imagination and dreaming the dreams of God for the world. In these things lies the movement of God's Spirit and our vitality as persons and a community of God's Spirit.