

June 8, 2014 / Pentecost Day / David L. Edwards

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 vibrant images of the invisible spirit of God and how it manifests in our lives. The spirit comes like a “violent wind” rushing into the room where the disciples have been waiting, as Jesus instructed them to do. The spirit is always spoken of in scripture as wind or breath. It comes, it goes. It gives life to the creation. It shakes things up and is uncontrollable. Like wind and breath, the spirit is invisible, yet essential to life, and you see its effects. We feel or sense it in our hearts, our minds, our spirits, our community, as we learn to wait and to be open to it.

The spirit is pictured as something like tongues of fire moving among the disciples and dividing off, a flame resting on the head of each. The spirit ignites and empowers in each of us the life Jesus manifested, our lives as unique human beings, created by God, and called by Jesus to love and serve God in a diversity of callings and gifts.

We are Jesus' disciples, his community; giving ourselves to the life he revealed and taught, the life of love—love of God, of others, of the creation, and of ourselves. And in all of this, we are always learning what it means to be open to and to live by the spirit of God. Whenever we are endeavoring to live life in this way, there is a tongue of fire resting on our heads. It comes as we commit ourselves to an intentional spiritual life in the inward and outward dimensions. The spirit is everywhere, permeating all creation, as Psalm 104 pictures so beautifully. It gives life and breath to all living things. And the spirit empowers human beings, as persons and as communities of faith, to live life as a journey of faith, being and becoming authentic human beings.

I once heard someone describe another person this way: “She lives like her hair is on fire.” There are some people like that, for whom life is a challenge, an adventure, and they throw themselves into it with focus and energy. They know what they are called and gifted to

do, and are giving themselves to it. We all can live this way, whenever we live with awareness instead of sleepwalking, whenever we give attention to our inward and outward life, instead of falling for all the numbing distractions that surround us daily in this culture. When we are living from the inside out, from our connection to God, the Power of Life, instead of from the outside in, according to outward expectations, demands, or definitions of who we are or what we should be, our hair is on fire! We have a flame on our heads.

I'm not talking about being enthusiastic or high energy or optimistic all the time. A person can be very spirit-filled and yet move 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 notes on cards. The assumption was that if you read from a prepared manuscript, the sermon was not very "spirit-filled." That never made sense to me. My experience was that carefully thought out and written sermons or lectures were far more spirit-filled than the boisterous sermons we sometimes endured in chapel.

Simply put, living with a tongue of fire on our heads happens when what we call the spiritual life becomes real for us, when we make it front and center. It means that we are giving attention to our lives and how we live them in our relationship with the sacred dimension of life. This is why when our community began in the early 1950s, it was to offer persons the opportunity to make a commitment to their own lives, their relationship to God, to discerning what they feel most called to do, and sharing the gifts they have been given by God for the service and enrichment of life. When we are doing that, we have a tongue of fire on our heads. We are living our authentic life as human beings, not the life prescribed for us by the world around us.

We ARE God's Gift to the World

To live with a tongue of flame on our head means to grow and deepen in the conviction of our value and worth in God's love, and thus the value and worth of others. The spirit touches our lives with a confirmation that we are exactly who God made us to be and become. Each of us is God's gift to the world, though most of us don't seem to believe that. We struggle with depression, feelings of worthlessness or boredom or guilt. We are always comparing ourselves with others, and coming up short. So we try to be like someone else we think of as successful socially, materially, or spiritually. 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 and claim 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. When Jesus said to his disciples, the crowd, and us, that we are the light of the world, he didn't mean just the nice and lovely parts of us, but the whole of who we are. He didn't mean you "will be" the light of the world when you become perfect or holy or some other spiritual accomplishment. We ARE the light of the world, and our work is to let God's spirit and love illumine and shine through us.

The tongue of fire, the spirit of God resting on our heads, is God's affirmation of and presence with us as we are. To live as though our hair is on fire means to be awakening to and growing in awareness that we ARE gifts from God to the world, just as we are, and also as we are coming to be. Our spiritual work is simply to live that way, patiently perceiving and letting go of the things that keep us from living this way.

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 reading 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 misused in public education—separating the most advantaged and accomplished kids from the others. There are not "the gifted" and those who are not. All are gifted. Our spiritual work is to discern and claim our own gifts, and to help others do the same.

What is it that I can offer to the community of faith and its ministries? How can I offer my gift in a way that it increases the common good? What is this other person's gift, without which my life and the community would be diminished? These are the sorts of questions we learn to ask to help us see ourselves and others in terms of giftedness. Every gift, no matter how we measure it, is essential to the life and work of our community. In fact, when we are living on the basis of the spirit and of gifts, we have to give up our life-killing habit of comparison—this person or that gift is greater or lesser, more or less important. Comparison is the killer of the spirit in community. Every person, every gift, is what constitutes and shapes the life of the community.

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. This, too, is living with our hair on fire. We live as though our lives matter because they DO matter!

Community and Diversity

First Corinthians 12 is really the golden text, even the constitution, of our community. To my mind, it is the apostle Paul's most brilliant writing, especially when we see it as the prelude to 1 Corinthians 13, the beautiful chapter on love. Paul's insight that community life is about diversity is profound and reflects the reality of the created world. The universe, the creation works by diversity, not uniformity. Psalm 104 says it simply: "How manifold (diverse) are your works!...The earth is full of your creatures."

Paul writes that it is the same in community. The community of Jesus experiences the reality of the one spirit that gives life to all, in a diversity of callings and gifts. Our community was born out of this very vision of life in community. It is organic, not institutional. It is marked by the celebration of diversity, not the imposition of conformity, in beliefs or actions. The callings and gifts that are in each person become the ministries that emerge within and from the community. Life works only by diversity, not by uniformity. This is the way it is throughout the creation. Ecosystems thrive because they are diverse, each creature, each entity, contributing something essential to the whole. That is why it is disastrous to the whole of the creation that we human beings have caused and continue to cause the extinction of thousands of life forms.

I think Paul was aware of this essential truth about the world, either consciously or unconsciously, when he wrote about the spirit and community. It is a call to celebrate diversity of callings and gifts. And it calls us to be watchful in ourselves for the ways we tend to want others to do what we are doing or to acknowledge that our ministry, our thing, is the most important.

It Never Stops

One final word. After the wind and fire business, Peter gets up to preach to the crowd that has gathered. 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, HAD to claim their own lives and dignity and strength.

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 flame on our heads! It won't go away. So our challenge is really the same as it always is—how are we to stay alive to 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?