

May 24, 2015 / 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.*

Today is Pentecost Sunday. We celebrate and reflect on the presence of God's spirit with and in the church, the community of faith, and in our lives as we give ourselves to following Jesus in the life of love, what our community calls the inward and outward journey of faith.

Psalm 104 gives us a panoramic view of God's spirit filling the world with creatures, giving them life and sustaining them. The Hebrew word for spirit (*ruach*) also means breath and wind. God's spirit is literally the breath of all creatures, including humans (Gen. 2:7). Once we begin to look with clarity of heart upon the surrounding creation, of which we are part and into which our lives are woven, we sense the vibrant energy of the Spirit of Life we call God. How can our inner spirits not be transposed into song? "I will sing to God as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being." God's spirit is the source and energy of life, everywhere present throughout the creation.

Our other readings have to do with how that everywhere-spirit of God is present and working in human beings, particularly within and through the community of faith. God's spirit is God's energy and vitality calling into being and motivating the community of faith. God's breath of life and sustenance and ministry is breathed into the community and its members. The Gospel of John especially speaks of this. In chapters 15 and 16, Jesus speaks to the disciples of the spirit that will come to them once he leaves. It is God's spirit of advocacy, helping and comforting them, keeping them reminded of all that they have come to know of God through Jesus. In the story of Jesus' first appearance to the disciples after the resurrection, he literally "breathes" on or into them the Holy Spirit, the power of the ministry of God's love(20:19-23).

The Acts of the Apostles is the continuation of Luke's gospel as he moves on to tell the stories of the early community of Jesus. The story of Pentecost begins: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." In the first chapter of Acts, 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 God's 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. If we are not willing to be in community with others, with the challenges and struggles it brings, then we will not really experience the power of God's spirit helping us grow in love. 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 deep joy that comes from being in community with other perfectly imperfect people whom Jesus also has called to embody his love, which is the love of God.

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 shared humanity. The silence that we have prior to the beginning of our worship, 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 deepest, truest self, and thereby our unity with others in God's spirit, opening 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 in our culture 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 interconnectedness of life. To be fully, authentically alive and truly helpful, we need to discern and know our place, our niche, in that interconnectedness. In this community, we speak of this in terms of 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. Prayerful waiting is the practice of being fully present, 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 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, sharing our lives more openly and lovingly with one another, paying attention to all the little things that prepare us to do the "big things". Faithfulness to prayerful waiting enables the group to pay attention to the mission as it unfolds. The mission may not always, or ever, be what the group imagined it might be. It will surely evolve and change and grow according to the spirit working in the minds, hearts, lives of those in the mission group, and the needs to which the group seeks to respond. Prayerful waiting is paying attention to the spirit's presence and work in us and through us. It is the work of our inward journey.

There is a sudden sound, like the rush of a violent wind. It fills the entire house where they are sitting. A tongue of fire rests on each of them. 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 reminds us that there is something bigger, deeper, wiser, and more powerful at work in this world than we are normally aware of. I have never heard or experienced the spirit of God in quite that way. But I have experienced what in Buddhism is called a "thundering silence", when we are in silence together, and enter a shared inner quietness and openness to God's spirit. 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 demanding that others conform to our ideas of what they should be or do. 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, spirit-impeding, search for perfection, 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 this place, in faithfulness and ministry. Our spiritual work is to become aware of and embrace this uniqueness. It 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. 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. Giving our attention to who God made US to be revitalizes us in God's spirit. Someone once described another person to me this way: She lives like her hair is on fire! That perfectly describes us when we begin to discover and live with the particular way God's spirit is present and working in us as persons, as mission groups, and as a community.

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 too early in the morning for that! 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 and breathes life into the world and 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 all the time, IF we listen to them. There was a story a few years ago 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. Seeing outside the boxes into which we have put life and others and ourselves.

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, 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 rather chaotic birthing place of God's dreams and visions. I think that the most under-exercised part of our spirit is our imagination, this capacity to see life as it truly is and is meant to be. 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. It is no wonder that one of Jesus' central teachings was that we need to become again like little children if we are to see and be part of God's kingdom, life as God created it to be.

One last thing. In his letter to the church in Rome, the portion we have today, Paul says two things that spoke to my heart this week. It has to do with how the spirit works in us as hope. "For in hope we were saved," he writes. "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

Hope, that inward attitude of positive expectancy, cannot be attached to the outcomes we want or designs we have for ourselves or the world. If we are living in harmony with God's spirit, the creative, life-giving energy of God working in us and through us as love, then our hope becomes wide open. We grow in our capacity to live with commitment to our inward and outward journeys, and a readiness for whatever God does in and through us, and around us, and wherever God's spirit leads us. Then we can truly say and believe that "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purposes." That is one of the most exciting, and sometimes challenging, things about this community. You never know who is going to feel called to be here. You never know how that seed of a particular vision for living out God's love, that mission, will grow. Things will likely never be what you had in mind, but will be, however, more real, more full of life, for they are the doing of God.

Being together in one place. Prayer and waiting expectantly. Becoming aware of and embracing 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 our lives and for the world. Growing in hope that is open and ready for whatever the spirit of God, and life itself, brings about. In these things lie the presence and movement of God's spirit, and our vitality as persons and a community of faith.