

“The Breath of Christ”

Acts 2: 1-21 John 20: 19-23

In Judaism, Pentecost was the celebration of the giving of the Ten Commandments, to people through Moses on Mt. Sinai. But, in the Christian faith, it is celebrated as the gift of the Spirit which gives birth to the church. It is a powerful birth story.

Quaker pastor, Philip Gulley, tells us that his father always told him how special he was because he had a police escort on the way to the hospital to be born. His father would say: “It was Sunday evening – I remember because I didn’t get to finish watching Gunsmoke; I had to drive your mother to the hospital. There was a terrific snowstorm and I was creeping along with my head out the car window when a policeman stopped us. Learning of the circumstances, he said, ‘follow me!’ and turned on his siren and you had a police escort on the way to being born.” All his young life, Philip Gulley felt special because of his birth story. Anytime his older brother would pick on him or say mean things, he would respond with: “No wonder you’re jealous; you didn’t have a police escort to be born, like I did.” Even as adults, after their father had died and they and their families were at their mom’s for a holiday dinner, Philip said to his brother, “Of course, unlike me, you didn’t have a police escort to be born.” Their mother responded, “What are you talking about? There was no snowstorm – it was a bright Sunday evening – I remember because your father wouldn’t take me to the hospital until he finished watching Gunsmoke! And the police had nothing to do with it; we had smooth sailing all the way to the hospital.”

So how do you respond to that story? (How you respond to that story is probably suggestive of how you respond to life!) Philip Gulley says that rather than being disillusioned and angry with his father, he is grateful to him for the gift of the story – a story that accomplished what his father hoped it would – making him feel special all his life. The power of the story.

Well, the New Testament has not one, but two wonderful stories of the birth of the church. They are both powerful theological documents written with a quill in one hand and the Hebrew Scriptures in the other. The more familiar Pentecost story, of course, is the one told by Luke in “volume two” of his gospel: Acts, chapter 2. It is an expansive, loud, dramatic story. A much quieter story of the gift of the spirit, and the birth of the church, is told by John in his gospel. In John’s story, the eleven disciples have locked themselves inside a house in Jerusalem out of fear. The Resurrected Christ appears in their midst, shows them his wounds to authenticate his identity, and says “peace be with you.” And then Jesus does something which confirmation classes to this day find “icky”: he breathed his breath into their mouths, and they could smell where he had come from – not only Golgotha and Galilee but way before that – back when the world itself was being

born: “In the beginning was the Word (capital “w”) and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...” This is not the first time something like this has happened. John has his Bible open to Genesis, chapter 2 where the event that makes humans unique during the creation story is: “God breathed in their nostrils and they became living souls.” In fact, in both Hebrew and Greek, the word for “breath” and the word for “spirit” are one and the same. And now the Resurrected Christ breathes his Holy Spirit into the frightened disciples, and what fear had killed in them, his breath brought back to life! Shy ones became bold; scared ones became courageous; lost ones found a sure purpose and direction. Disciples who had not believed themselves capable of tying their own sandals without Jesus, discovered abilities within themselves they never knew they had. When they opened their mouths to speak, they sounded like Jesus. When they laid their hands upon the sick, it was as if Jesus himself had touched them. Soon, they were doing things they had never seen anyone but him do, and there was no explanation for it, except that they had dared to inhale the breath of the Risen One. “Breath on me Breath of God, Fill me with life anew!”

But there is a narrowness to John – and at John’s “Pentecost”, Christ confers his spirit only on the eleven who become the guardians of that Spirit: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven: if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” When John finished a hard day of writing his gospel, he should have stuck his head in the door of his home and said, “Honey, I shrunk the church!” His is an exclusive and excluding church.

But the Johannine idea of church is not the only one in the New Testament. When Luke writes his birth story of the church in Acts 2, he says, “It all happened when (not just eleven) but one hundred twenty people were gathered together to celebrate the festival of Pentecost. Luke, also has his Hebrew Bible open – but rather than open to Genesis 2; it is opened to Exodus 20 which tells of Moses going up Mt. Sinai to receive the Law and God’s presence on the mountain is accompanied by an overwhelming wind, and smoke and fire. So, for Luke, Pentecost begins with the sound of a mighty wind and it fills the entire house where Jesus’ followers are sitting. And then, Luke flips over to Genesis 11, which begins “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words” and tells the story of the Tower of Babel which arrogance built, so that God scattered people by confusing their language so they couldn’t understand one another. And for Luke, Pentecost is a reversal of the Tower of Babel. “They were bewildered because each one heard them speaking in their own language.”

One of the ironies of today’s church is that some believe that one must have the gift of “speaking in tongues” or “glossalalia” to be truly “Pentecostal”.

At Pentecost, the gift of tongues was a ability to speak someone else’s language and the real miracle was the miracle of understanding each other in spite of differences. Anyone who has teenage children knows what a miracle that is!

How much we need the miracle of that Pentecost today. For we do not hear each other.

B. David Napier writes:

“A something quite describable is missing;
We do not really speak to one another;
We do not really see and read each other.
A something sweet and soft and warm, responding
in words, in speech, in plain communication
is missing, wanting, absent – or illusive:
always, O God, so damnably illusive –
a something that is something like a Word...”

Certainly we have difficulty hearing one another across barriers of culture, religion and nationality when we literally speak different languages. But we also have difficulty hearing one another in our families. On this Mother’s Day, I am tempted to ask all the women who have said to their spouse or children recently, “You don’t understand”, to raise your hand, but I’m afraid it would look like a Hitler rally! What you’re really saying, of course, is “I can’t tell that you’ve heard me.”

And how much we need the Pentecostal miracle of truly hearing one another in church – especially in church. It may seem that we all speak the same language in church, because we have the same words in common, but we mean very different things by those words because we are different and we have different values. And, after all, I believe it is the differences among us which love appreciates. When we fall in love, it is not with our commonality but with what makes her (or him) unique: the utterly delightful idiosyncrasies of voice, movement, appearance, the way she reacts and responds all of which belong to her alone. And so with the church on that first Pentecost. With the miraculous gift of the Spirit, they were in fact made even more aware of the differences. Yet despite their differences they were able to hear one another. Hearing does not mean agreeing.

Dear friends, in the ten short months that I have been your interim minister, I have managed to offend most of you with one decision or another. I don’t apologize for those decisions. I believe that’s the nature of interim ministry. But I do apologize where I have failed to listen to you or to truly hear your concerns and appreciate those concerns and let you know that I have heard you no matter how much we may disagree. I covenant not to give up on you and I pray that you will covenant not to give up on me. (If you’re sitting there saying, “Virginia, what’s he talking about?” I just want to say that I hope you’ll enjoy your first Sunday here and stay for Coffee Hour!) In the meantime, we pray for the Miracle of Pentecost in our midst! It would be interesting to hear someone say, “I guess Hancock is a Pentecostal Church. They really hear one another.”

According to Acts 2, when Peter gets up to speak, what comes out is an old prophecy from the Hebrew prophet Joel, who foresaw days just like this one when God's spirit would be poured out upon all flesh – not just chosen people, not just eleven male persons; not just church people, but all people – young and old, male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile.

“And they were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others mocking said, ‘They were filled with new wine.’” They were drunk all right, but not with wine. They were drunk with the dizzying possibility of the Love of God breaking out all over the place, smashing down barriers and opening our ears to hear one another. Now that's Pentecostal!