

SPIRIT UNLEASHED

Sermon: May 30, 2010

Trinity Sunday

Lessons: Psalm 8; Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

Last week, we celebrated the day of Pentecost. We talked about the movement of the Holy Spirit, in a big way, with a huge sign. People saw visible tongues of fire on each believer, symbolizing the Holy Spirit. They were able to hear one another in their own language. On that day of Pentecost, the early church experienced such a movement of the Spirit that it became a threat to the religious leaders of the time. Many people saw what took place, but simply could not identify that experience as an encounter with God. They thought the crazy Christians were drunk. The religious leaders of the day resisted seeing God at work through the Holy Spirit in that Pentecost experience.

Today, one week after the celebration of the Pentecost, we lift up our confessional faith and belief in the Holy Trinity. We believe in God the Father/creator. We believe in God the son/savior. We believe in God the Holy Spirit. I considered preaching a doctrinal sermon this morning – trying to explain the meaning and the importance of the our belief in the Triune. I considered preaching a teaching sermon – trying to trace the development of the Trinity in Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures. But I decided that those sermons were to big do complicated to do in the time allotted for a Sunday morning message. So I would like to focus this meditation of just one aspect of the Trinity - the Holy Spirit and ask the question: what role does the Holy Spirit play in our lives today?

In our lessons for today, we read these words:

God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Romans 5:5b)

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. (John 16:13a)

Both passages speak of what happens when people of God encounter the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit has always played a tremendous role in the life of the Church. The Holy Spirit pushes us beyond where we are, and calls us to faithfulness. The Holy Spirit gathers us together with various other people, even if we don't necessarily like them. The Holy Spirit challenges us to give up old habits, enlightening our vision and opening our eyes. The Holy Spirit works on us, sanctifying and strengthening us where we are broken and sinful. The Holy Spirit directs us and helps us to speak about God's movement in our lives.

The early Christian community somehow had a deeper understanding of the Holy Spirit than we do today. In the early church, the Spirit had a vital role in empowering people to share, understand, and accept the good news. The book of Acts reads like a diary of the Spirit's work among the first-century Christians. The resurrected Jesus told the disciples that they would soon be baptized with the Holy Spirit in Acts 1. Acts 2 tells about the

intense outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, and Peter invited those present to receive the Spirit. In each chapter, more and more people were added to the faith by the Spirit's work.

The Spirit radiated throughout the mission of the early Christians. Empowered by Holy Spirit the disciples healed people in the name of Jesus Christ and found the words to stand up to those threatened by their action: the religious authorities. The Holy Spirit moved Peter to respond to a Gentile's request for the good news, and the Holy Spirit came upon those Gentiles who heard Peter's message, so that they could believe. Paul and his cohorts followed the direction and guidance of the Spirit in their missionary journeys. The Spirit helped all of the apostles determine where to speak and what to say.

So if the Holy Spirit had such a public, vital role in the early church, what is the Spirit's role now, here, in this church? What is the Holy Spirit doing today? Some people would say that we in the Lutheran Church are becoming increasingly distanced from the Holy Spirit. We have forgotten what it was like to let go and let the Spirit work. We don't like the idea that we might lose control. We like to know what to expect.

But the Spirit doesn't always act in orderly, quiet, anticipated ways, as evidenced in the spectacle of Pentecost. Sometimes God's Spirit works in loud, unexpected, intense ways. What if one Sunday morning, several of us were moved by the Spirit to raise our hands, or to shout Amen, or to clap our hands in song? Would we be able to see it as the Spirit's work in our members, or would we think they had a little too much to drink the night before? What if a member told us that they had received a revelation from the Holy Spirit? Would we be open to letting the Spirit move us in a new way, or would we be too afraid of what other people might think?

Annie Dillard, in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* warns the church about praying for the presence of the Holy Spirit: "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are like children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets...Ushers should issue life preservers... and signal flares;... they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us to where we can never return." ⁱ

Opening ourselves to the Spirit's work can mean uncertainty and ambiguity. The Spirit does not always speak to us in a loud, clear voice, and we have to be tuned in to hear what the Spirit is saying. We have to be aware of that sense and be able to see it as the Spirit's work in order to go along with it.

Harvard scholar Diana Eck, in her work *Encountering God*, has discovered that Pentecost was one of the most unique and creatively celebrated days on the medieval church's calendar. In 10th-century Rome, the church had an intense Pentecost celebration. In order to make the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost a dramatic,

dynamic event for their congregations, Christians of that day involved architecture, not just anthems. They designed their churches to accommodate the Holy Spirit's work therein.

The custom of painting heavenly scenes on the great domed and vaulted ceilings of cathedrals served not only to inspire the devout with blessed visions. It also disguised some discreet trap doors. These small openings were drilled through the cathedral ceiling to the rooftop. During the Pentecost worship service, some hapless servants would be drafted to clamber up on the roof. At the appropriate moment during the liturgy, they would release live doves through these holes. From out of the painted skies and clouds on the cathedral ceiling came swooping, diving symbols of a vitally present Holy Spirit, descending on the people below.

At the same moment, the choirboys would break into the whooshing and drumming sound of a holy windstorm. Finally, as the doves were flying and the winds were rushing, the ceiling holes would once again be utilized – as bushels upon bushels of red rose petals were showered down upon the congregation. These red, flickering bits of flowers symbolized tongues of flame falling upon all who waited below in faith. They called these openings to the sky in medieval churches "Holy Spirit holes." ⁱⁱ

Eck argues that

We need these Holy Spirit holes. Our churches need these skyward openings to the wind rush of God.... Holy Spirit holes would be perpetual reminders to both the prophetic and the Pentecostal movements in our churches that our knowledge of God is not complete. They would ceaselessly remind us that no image or icon, no [rose] petal or flame can domesticate God's Spirit. Its symbolic images, like the dove and the wildfire, are images of utter freedom." ⁱⁱⁱ

Can you imagine that same kind of Spirit-breathing, breathtaking power and vitality blowing down from the ceilings of our churches today? Do you think the Spirit has access to us through our wooden-beamed sanctuary ceiling here? Instead of experiencing doves and flames swooping out from "Holy Spirit holes," are the well-insulated ceilings of our churches, like our souls, closed to any surprise visitations from above? Do we need to break open some Holy Spirit holes to open us outward and skyward to the Divine?

We need to get ready for the Spirit to do a mighty thing in our congregation. We need to trust that the Spirit has an important role in the life of this church, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit in us. We need to break open some Holy Spirit holes in our church and our minds, so we can be accessible for the Spirit to work on us. And when the Spirit of truth comes into our lives, we will be guided into all truth. What will the Holy Spirit do with us and to us? And what can we do through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit? Who knows! Maybe we'll see a Spirit event that they'll be talking about for two thousand years to come just like that first Pentecost event. Only time will tell. Amen.

ⁱ Annie Dilliard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1982), pp. 40-41

ⁱⁱ Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), p. 73.

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