
Homily

Feast of Pentecost, Year C The Baptism of Jessica Brown

"the disciples were all together in one place. 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."

Our reading from the Book of Acts describes in vivid detail the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Only 10 days have passed since the disciples gathered in Bethany, a few miles from Jerusalem, to receive the final blessing of Jesus and to witness his ascension into heaven. But before leaving, Jesus asks them to go back to Jerusalem and wait there to receive power from on high.

I wonder what that period of waiting must have been like for the eleven disciples and other followers. Acts tells us that they are all gathered together in one house. I imagine they passed the time remembering their life before Jesus left them; the healings, the parables and teachings, the dinner parties and miraculous events, everything they had witnessed in the years they had spent together. But I also imagine their waiting was a time of anxiety. Jesus gave them no time frame for Spirit's arrival - all they can do is sit and wait. It is a period of anticipation - a period of pregnant expectation. Day after day they gather and long for the promise to come to pass.

When the Spirit finally appears they first hear her approach, and then experience the gift in all its power. The scene is as miraculous as anything they have experienced before. Tongues appear like flames of fire alighting on each person in the house; next they are heard speaking in every language imaginable. Those who hear are amazed and bewildered. The crowd listens as God's deeds of power are heard in their native tongues. It is the reversal of the Tower of Babel where God separated the nations by confusing their language" now all are reconciled in the mysterious power of the Spirit. Something new is happening, the birth of the church, forever changing human history.

What does the coming of the Holy Spirit mean? Richard Sheffield suggests we ask this question another way, "On the day of Pentecost what song or hymn might we sing, "Happy Birthday" or "In Christ there is no East or West"? In other words do we see the event as the birthday of the church or as the opening of the church beyond the confines of Israel?

I don't think the answer is an either/or, but rather a both/and. Something new is born in the lives of the disciples as the Holy Spirit falls on them, and it strips away the fear and sadness in the loss of Jesus' physical presence. The Spirit gives them courage to leave the room they have been sitting in, leading them out to proclaim the Good News to the world - particularly God's love for them in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. So Happy Birthday is a very appropriate song to sing - the birth of the church is accomplished.

In the confusion and bewilderment and the accusation of drunkenness Peter remembers the words of the prophet Joel, God is pouring out his Spirit on all flesh so that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. The church is not meant to be an exclusive community; it is to be a community for all people. The promise given centuries ago to Abram and Sara has now come to pass for "through them, all the families of the earth" are being blessed. So we can also sing, "For now in Christ there is no East or West, in him no North or South, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth." Our story is about the birth and the ongoing mission and ministry of the Church. For the most part the church has been a positive influence in the world - but not always.

Tonight we gather to celebrate the baptism of Jessica Brown. As we incorporate her into the family of the church and make her our newest sister in Christ we continue the mission of the church. Part of our service will include Jessica making a profession of faith and we will be invited to join her in renewing our covenant with God. I shared with Jessica a story in one of our meetings a few weeks ago about our baptismal promises. Recently I attended a conference of clergy and laity regarding building community through music. A retired priest and leader of the conference said something that was shocking especially to the clergy present. He said he was weary of the baptismal covenant. His comment grabbed our attention. It is not the content of the promises that makes him weary; it's the way in which they are framed. We make them into a laundry list of do's to be checked off. Tom suggested we view them as holy habits to be desired and longed for in our lives as Christians.

Long to be with the family of God gathered in worship, study, and communion. Long to be in relationship with God and neighbor, and when we fail to desire forgiveness and seek it out. Long to share the gospel of Christ, spreading the good news to all who will listen. Showing the love of Christ through the way we live, so that others take notice and want to have what we have. Long to seek and serve Christ in our neighbors just as they are; Muslim and Jew, Asian and Hispanic, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, those who look and think and act like us, but more importantly those who are radically different from us. Long and strive for justice and peace for every person, because every human being is made in the image of God and deserves to be treated with dignity.

Our baptismal covenant asks us to embody the radical call of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We make and keep our promises only with the help of God in the power of the Spirit, transforming our hearts so that we help them become a reality. For when we incarnate them in our daily lives, then we begin to establish the Shalom of God in the earth - that is wholeness and peace for all. Jesus sends us the Holy Spirit to be our Advocate, our guide, and our teacher, assisting us in remembering the sacred story of his life, so that we can emulate him as we await his final return.

As we move through the rest of our liturgy, listen as we remember and retell the sacred story of God's love, you will hear it in the prayer of thanksgiving over the baptismal water and in the Eucharistic prayer. Through them, the words and the remembering the Spirit will form and reform us again and again, so that we can speak and live the story for the sake of the world. Remember that you are empowered to participate in bringing the peace and wholeness of God to every human being. Let me close with a verse of a poem by the liturgist Ruth Duck:

Arise, your light has come!
The Spirit's call obey;
Show forth the glory of your God,
Which shines on you today. AMEN.