

"The Spirit!"

Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost Sunday! Like Christmas and Easter it comes around every year. One of the big three! Only it doesn't get the same kind of attention that Christmas and Easter get, possibly because there is no secular counterpart, no bearded, kindly, overweight old man with a bag full of presents; no cute, furry animal carrying a basket of colored eggs.

Another problem is that Pentecost is a little harder to get a handle on. Christmas and Easter are both pretty straight forward -- Jesus is born, Jesus is raised from the dead! But Pentecost? What was it again? Something about the Holy Spirit and the church? When was it? So many weeks after Easter or near Memorial Day?

In addition, when you start telling the story of Pentecost you find yourself immediately entangled in metaphor. "Well there were these tongues of fire, see, and this rush of wind that sounded like a cyclone coming through, and, oh yeah, the people started babbling in other tongues." It's no wonder, really, that Pentecost doesn't get it's due.

But to top it all off, a central theme of Pentecost is the coming of the Holy Spirit. What do we mean, exactly, when we talk about the Holy Spirit? We sing praise to the Holy Spirit in the *Gloria Patri* and in the *Doxology*. We baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The benediction is given with that same formula. The children's author Madeleine L'Engle relates a story told by Dorothy Sayers about a Japanese gentleman who said: "Honorable Father, very good.

Honorable Son, very good. Honorable Bird I do not understand at all." Madeleine L'Engle says, "very few of us understand Honorable Bird, "except to acknowledge that without his power and grace, nothing would be written, painted, or composed at all...."¹

The symbols of Pentecost, those metaphors, help some. They are rich in one sense and yet in paltry in another when compared to the reality they point to. The flickering flame, the whispering wind, speak of gentleness, as does the dove which is also a metaphor for the Spirit. And yet both flame and wind, as we all know, can at times be anything but gentle. They have the power to overwhelm, to level buildings, to incinerate.

And then there is the language – everyone speaking at once but in different languages. We went to a restaurant recently with another couple and I strained to hear what the people at our table were saying, as I strained to be heard. There were multiple conversations going on at tables all around us and the noise was bouncing off the walls – a cacophony of voices and words all filling the air at once. Pentecost, from what we understand, was something like that. And yet out of that cacophony came understanding and communication. "Are not all these Galileans? How is it then that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?"

Madeleine L'Engle is right when she says: "An infinite question is often destroyed by finite answers. To define everything is to annihilate much that gives us laughter and joy."² I have always like that take on the Holy Spirit, that it has to do with something that gives us laughter and joy. It seems to me that one way of getting a handle on the Holy Spirit is to think of the Spirit as the playful side of God, the side of God that dances and sings.

Luke's story of the Day of Pentecost has a playful element in it. There is this great commotion and even confusion, leaving some of the spectators wondering if the apostles hadn't gotten into the communion wine. "They're all drunk," someone said. When was the last time that anyone observing Presbyterian worship accused us of being drunk? Asleep maybe, but not drunk!

The ancient Greeks had a god they called Hermes (whom the Romans called Mercury) who was in some ways what I imagine the Spirit to be like. Hermes was playful, and in fact, a little mischievous -- something of a thief. When people are engaged in lively discussion and suddenly it seems that everyone stops talking at the same time, and there is a lull in the conversation, the Greeks would say that that is the work of Hermes. That Hermes has come into the room and has stolen the conversation. One writer says: "Whenever things seem fixed, rigid, 'stuck,' Hermes introduces fluidity, motion, new beginnings--and the confusion that almost inevitably precedes new beginnings."³

One could say that before Pentecost things were stuck. The disciples were waiting around for something to happen. All they had been able to accomplish so far was a business meeting. They had heard a report from the Nominating Committee and they had an election, and that was about it. They were stuck. What do we do now? And then, suddenly, a blast of heavenly wind comes out of nowhere and introduces fluidity, motion, new beginnings. And confusion.

One time some years ago in another church I was busy in my study preparing a sermon on the text from John, chapter 2 about the wedding in Cana of Galilee when Jesus turned water into wine. And as sometimes happens in sermon preparation, it wasn't coming. I was stuck. I knew that I wanted to convey something about the joy and the wonder of this story, but it was coming out way too serious.

I went out into the hallway to get a drink of water, and there I encountered a young woman I had never seen before, coming out of the chapel looking for the light switch. No one ever came out of the chapel! I was momentarily taken aback. But then I remembered that my secretary had told me that someone was planning an outdoor wedding in August and had asked if the chapel could be available as a back up in case of rain. This young woman before me was the bride-to-be. She thought the chapel might be too small, however, so she went to look at the sanctuary. When she came back she had a few questions.

It's going to be an Episcopal service, she said, even though she herself was a Methodist, because her fiancé was Episcopalian, and she was thinking of changing her affiliation. Only they didn't know the Episcopal priest in town, so they had asked a friend of theirs, a Lutheran minister, to perform the ceremony. "Let me see if I've got this straight. You are a Methodist, but you are going to have an Episcopal wedding service performed by a Lutheran minister in a Presbyterian church?" "That's right," she said. "But only if it rains."

And she wanted to know if that was all right. Was it all right to have an Episcopal ceremony in a Presbyterian church? I said I couldn't see what harm it could do. Well, were there any restrictions they should know about? I couldn't think of any, I said, except that we don't allow any alcoholic beverages. Sure, she said. That was fine. Only they were planning to have communion, and the Episcopalians use real wine for communion. "Well, that would be all right. That's not the same as what I was thinking about," said I.

Then she had a couple of other questions. What do you call an Episcopal priest who is a woman? You wouldn't call her "Father?" Well, no, I don't suppose you would. Would you call her "Mother?" That doesn't sound quite right either, I said. I think I would just ask her.

And then she was gone and I was back at my desk working on my sermon for Sunday. Let's see -- there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee. The mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples were also invited. They ran out of wine. Jesus turned the water into wine. Back to my serious task, my heavy responsibility of bringing the good news to my flock. Weighty stuff, you know. It was weighing upon me, as it sometimes does.

Only slowly did it begin to dawn upon me what had just happened. A gift had been sent to me. Here I was working on this sermon about a wedding in Cana, and in walks this bride-to-be, with her odd plans and her unusual questions, raising the issue of whether it would be appropriate to have real wine for communion in a sanctuary that, as far as I knew, had never seen anything but grape juice in its hundred and twenty-five plus years of existence.

And what can I say? It was Hermes, playful, mischievous Hermes. Or as we would say, it was the Spirit, coming to lighten my load. I was stuck, and the wind of the Spirit blew and this young woman showed up and instead of a heavy load, suddenly it became playful. Well, it was just a coincidence, someone will say. Yes, it was. But sometimes coincidences can be very serendipitous. It was an experience of synchronicity, as some would call it, or a moment of sheer grace, as others might say.

I found myself wishing that I hadn't been in such a hurry to answer her questions so that she would leave and I could get back to my work. For she turned my serious task of sermon preparation into something a little more fun. She transformed it, just as Jesus transformed the water into wine. She made me laugh with her ecumenical wedding plans and her dilemma of what to call a woman priest, just as Jesus had kept the laughter flowing along with the wine at the wedding feast that day.

I don't really know much about the Holy Spirit, but I agree with Madeleine L'Engle that to define everything is to "annihilate much that gives us laughter and joy." A family therapist who also works with churches describes a kind of seriousness that kills the spirit. He says it is a total orientation characterized by anxiety, lack of flexibility, an inability to change direction, and a loss of perspective and focus.⁴ It seems to me that the Spirit is never further from the community of faith than when we get stuck in that kind of seriousness, rigidity and anxiety. The antidote to seriousness, he says, is the capacity to be playful, which is not to be equated with making jokes, but with a change in attitude. It is to allow the Holy Spirit to come into our fellowship and to disrupt our seriousness.

I sense the presence of the Holy Spirit often here in this church. I sense the Spirit when there is laughter – not the kind that makes fun of people, but the spontaneous laughter of people who just like being together. I sense the Spirit in our midst when people are creative, and we have many creative people in this congregation. Sometimes we get stuck, and then someone says, "well how about...." or "why don't we...." and suddenly there is new energy in the room. I sense the presence of the Holy Spirit when we are gathered around looking at finance reports, which at times can be a little depressing, and there are wringing hands and furrowed brows. And then someone says, "no worries! We'll make it! We've got to have faith." And I sense the presence of the Spirit in our midst also when someone directs our attention outward to a person or to persons in need and says, "why don't we see if we can't do something about that?"

No, I can't define the Holy Spirit, and I'm not sure that that would be a very productive effort anyway. But I think I can recognize the Spirit's presence, and I sense the Spirit here often.

¹ A Circle of Quiet, in *Word and Witness*, 6/2/85

² *Ibid.*

³ *Gods in Everyman*, Bolen, p. 162

⁴ *Generation to Generation*, Friedman, p.50