

Prayer: Gracious God, bless now the words of my lips and meditations of our hearts. Breath your Spirit into us and grant that we may hear and in hearing be led in the way you want us to go. Amen.

Prophesy, Visions, Dreams

Acts 2:1-21

May 31, 2009

It's the church's birthday today – not the birthday of this particular local church, Maple Grove – not the one that traces its history back to a time when it shared space with the Maple Grove School in a white brick schoolhouse on this corner or the Maple Grove farm before that – not the one that was considered a “mission” of the Como Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church until 1920. No, rather the one that birthed this one – the one which is the model for this one – the historical, Holy, Apostolic, Catholic or universal, one.

We do it every year – celebrate the birthday of that church. We've heard the story a time or two - the story about how there was a group of people in a house in Jerusalem that sensed a presence - a power - they'd never encountered before – how it happened on the day of Pentecost, one of three special Jewish festivals when male Jews who lived within twenty miles of Jerusalem were required to go to Jerusalem and how that meant Jews from a much wider area migrated to the holy city thus creating a truly internationally-flavored crowd.

We've heard about the believers' attempt to describe what the experience was like – the references to violent wind and strange flickerings in the air that looked something like tongues of fire. We've heard about how crowded Jerusalem was – how multi-national, curiosity-seeking, bewildered the crowd was that gathered around the house to catch a glimpse of the excitement rumored to be going on inside. We've heard about how those gathered around the house became aware that the religious phenomenon going on inside the house wasn't just for the select few inside but that it was available to everyone. We've heard about how it spilled into the streets and people from everywhere understood it in their own tongues.

And yes, we've heard about the accusation that those on the inside of the house had simply had too much of the liquid kind of spirit thus supposedly explaining to some the strange goings on inside the house.

But the events of that day earned for the day the label of the birthday of the church for more reasons than these seemingly supernatural phenomena. What additionally earned Pentecost the title of the birthday of the church was the fact that the encounter with the Holy Spirit was more than an emotional high - more than some spiritual ecstasy - more than something supernatural. The emotional encounter produced within the followers of Jesus Christ a new awareness of the potential within themselves and of their community of faith. The Holy Spirit unleashed within them a new creativity - a new enthusiasm – a new boldness to speak out on behalf of God about the issues of the day - a new sense of the gifts that were theirs to share. The encounter with the Holy Spirit empowered them to prophesy - to dream - and to see visions: to act - to create - to teach - to worship - to live the faith - to minister to others - to see the cost of discipleship and not be afraid - to reject the assumption that continuing what Jesus had started wasn't something for which they could risk their lives.

When Peter denied that those in the house were drunk and proclaimed that what was really going on was that they were experiencing what the prophet Joel had said he'd heard God say to him many years before: that there would come a day when God's spirit would be poured out on all people and the effect would be that sons and daughters and young men and young women and old men and old women would prophesy, would see visions and dream dreams; when Peter reminded those gathered about Joel's words, he was announcing that that day had arrived - that it was God's spirit that was at work in him and in his fellow followers.

Jesus had tried over and over by word and example to warn his followers about the “cost” of following him. He had instructed them to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick and imprisoned, to heal the sick, and to just plain minister wherever human need was discovered. They'd heard, but they'd not understood or believed it was something they could really pull-off, until - until that day when the Holy Spirit got hold of them and changed their understanding of themselves and thus their hearts and their

minds and their wills.

One of the founders of the United Methodist Church, John Wesley, had a Pentecost type of experience in his life in 1738. It happened at a meeting in London on Aldersgate Street while the leader was simply reading Martin Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. We all know what Wesley said later about the experience, "I felt my heart strangely warmed." The Holy Spirit flooded his soul and his ministry took on a new enthusiasm, a new look, new meaning.

And it wasn't an enthusiasm that sought simply to duplicate the emotional release he had experienced at Aldersgate, as important as that experience was to Wesley and his conviction that salvation comes through this personal transforming encounter with the Holy Spirit. Wesley believed it was also necessary to be enthusiastic about doing the work of God in the world. Wesley believed that one without the other was an incomplete conversion, an incomplete expression of the Christian life, an incomplete journey of faith. He put the need to express one's faith in a saying that has become pretty well-known: "Do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can." Works of mercy and works of piety, enthusiastic worship and enthusiastic service, went hand in hand as far as Wesley was concerned and his convictions about it took hold when the Holy Spirit got hold of him.

I've used the illustration before of the young woman in a preaching class at Boston University School of Theology who developed a sermon on "The Holy Trinity" in which she chose to deal with the traditional titles of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. She started by making a case for the Father being thought of as this transcendent diety who rules over us.

Then she made a case for the Son as the Christ who heals and reconciles among us.

Finally she defined the Holy Spirit as "the God who comes up through us." The Holy Spirit is that aspect of God that takes up residence in us – that works within us to change us – that heals us of those inhibiting thoughts about ourselves – that prepares us for our day – that strengthens us for what lies ahead – that places within us a boldness to speak out about social ills around us – to prophesy. It is the Holy Spirit that enables us to dream dreams – that awakens within us a vision of what could be and propels us into ministry to make a reality of the vision. The Holy Spirit is that aspect of God that enables us to love and serve.

On her way home from church one Sunday a little girl turned to her mother and said, "Mommy, the preacher's sermon this morning confused me."

The mother said, "Oh! Why is that?"

And the little girl replied, "Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. Is that true?"

The mother replied, "Yes, that's true."

The little girl continued with, "He also said that God lives within us. Is that true too?"

And the mother again replied, "Yes."

"Well," said the little girl, "If God is bigger than us and he lives in us, wouldn't he show through?"¹

The Holy Spirit is what shows through us.

Rev. Al Harris, one-time pastor of Missionary Baptist Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, shares a story when he attempts to describe how the Holy Spirit works. He recounts how a little boy was playing outside his home one June evening just a little past dusk. He noticed some fireflies – lightning bugs – glow worms. The little boy was fascinated by their brightness and ran into the house and excitedly asked his dad, "Daddy, what makes fireflies glow?"

His dad wasn't real sure how to answer his son and so said, "I don't really know. Why don't you ask your teacher at school."

The little boy returned to his play and admired even more this fascinating creature. Then he tried to catch one but failed. He tried again and missed. When he tried again, he clapped his hands together and

succeeded squishing one between the palms of his hands. Making a face as he felt the mashed insect's body between his hands, he slowly opened them to see the wasted creature. To his surprise the dead firefly was still glowing in the palms of his hands.

He excitedly rushed back into the house yelling, "Daddy, daddy, I found out what it is that makes fireflies glow!"

The dad was pleased that his son had figured it out on his own and asked, "And, what is it, son?"

"It's the stuff inside!" he proudly proclaimed, showing him the palm of his hand.

And Rev. Harris commented, "The same thing is true of followers of Jesus Christ. What is it that gives us that glow? The answer is simple. It's the stuff inside – the Holy Spirit."²

Everyone within the sound of my voice this morning has been provided by God our own special day of Pentecost - a day in which God instills within us the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it is this indwelling, this personal day of Pentecost, which we pray for as a church over every believer when we lay hands upon them on the day of their confirmation – such as we will/did for several this morning: "The Holy Spirit work within you, that having been born through water and the Spirit, you may live as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ."

When God gives us the Spirit God gives us more than strength and support and teaching and comfort, those things we normally identify with the Spirit's presence. God also gives us more than joy, peace, patience, and kindness, those things which we call the fruits of the Spirit. When God gives us the Spirit God also gives us a set of gifts - gifts designed for the building up of the body of the church, and for the individual ministries to which we are called, and for our spiritual life. And the Spirit awakens in us the boldness to prophesy, the visions and the dreams for the utilization of our gifts.

There was a discussion in an adult Sunday School class one Sunday morning about some of the disciples Jesus chose. They talked about the Galilean fishermen – Peter, Andrew, James and John – and they wondered among themselves if Jesus couldn't have found a group of people with some better qualifications than what they understood these men of the water to have.

And then they talked about Matthew, the tax-collector, and they questioned the wisdom of including a person from such an obviously dishonest, politically-appointed career to a position among the inner circle of followers.

Finally, the discussion turned to Judas. It didn't take long for one of the members of the group to loudly voice what many were thinking: "Why in the world would Jesus choose someone like Judas to be one of his disciples?" A man who had been sitting rather silently in the back of the room finally spoke and softly and reflectively observed, "You know, I'm not really sure why Jesus did choose Judas, but I've often wondered the same thing about myself – why indeed did Jesus choose me?"

I've often asked myself that question as well, "Why indeed did Jesus choose me?" "What could God have been thinking when God looked at that insecure, basically shy, quiet, temptation and guilt-laden teenager?" "What could God have been thinking when God got into my heart and my mind and my will and revealed to me that he wanted to use me?"

I almost daily ask myself a similar question about the call of God upon my life. Today's question is phrased more like this though, "What is it God wants me to do, how does God want to use me today?" Despite my questions about what it is God could have been thinking when he chose me and what does God want me to do today, I have no doubt about whether God chose me, just questions about what for in this day.

I also have no doubt about your chosenness. Being a Christian means we are chosen. It comes with the territory – with the label. Our role is simply to decide to accept our chosenness and thus what Christ has to offer. When we say yes to Jesus Christ's choice of us, then God sends the Holy Spirit to take up residence in us. And the Spirit's purpose within us again, is to reveal all our potential, to untap our creative juices, to set free the gifts

that lie within us, to help us not only identify the cost of our discipleship but to provide the resources, the visions, the dreams for our expending ourselves in God's name.

Lightening struck the early church. The wind blew with violence. In other places in the Bible we read of the Spirit gently coming on followers through the breath of Christ. It doesn't matter the way in which it happens, only that it does. The coming of the Holy Spirit is an exciting experience in the life of the church and in our lives not because of the way it comes but because of the result of its coming. The coming of the Holy Spirit is an exciting experience because it stirs within us the reality of the presence of God and a sense of direction for our lives and the life of the church. It's not about ecstasy or enthusiasm or speaking in tongues, or extremism, or emotionalism, although they may be present at times. The coming of the Holy Spirit, that which gives the church its life, that which signifies its birthday, is about providing guidance and inspiration and motivation and the boldness to prophesy, to envision, to dream.

Today is the birthday of the historical church. But there are some things happening among us that make me sense that it's also a day when we can acknowledge that the Spirit is having its way in a new way in and through the life of Maple Grove and those who make it up. The Spirit's doing a new thing among us and there's probably more to come. May our hearts be ready to hear the call of God in our individual lives and in our life together as a community of Christians. Stay alert – the day of the Lord is happening! Come, Holy Spirit, come!

Let us pray.

1. Homiletics, May-June, 2009, p. 41.
2. Ibid., p. 40.

