

Grace Episcopal Church Galena, Illinois
Pentecost Sunday, May 19, 2013
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell
"Holy Listening" Texts--Acts 2: 1-21

Think for a moment of the ways you have celebrated the Day of Pentecost in various churches through the years. I remember red helium balloons that were released into the skies after worship--until we learned how dangerous balloon bits are to birds. Then, there was--and is--red boa day at All Saints Ravenswood in Chicago. Yes, red boas. Feather boas that choir members wear over their white labs in processions. Along with hats. Some churches festoon their naves with swaths of red and gold fabric.

Possibly the most dramatic account I have heard is told by Harvard scholar Diane Eck about medieval cathedrals. The ceiling paintings, she says, camouflaged trap doors. At the appropriate point in the Pentecost liturgy, some poor servants opened the traps and released live white doves that swooped and descended into the church below. As the choir sang and made whooshing sounds of a windstorm, bushels of bright red rose petals fluttered down. Spirit holes These trap doors were called "Holy Spirit holes."

No matter how elaborate celebrations are, though, they don't come close to what people experienced on that day in Jerusalem. For one thing, we do not have a context that is comparable. We do not have a Temple that is the center of our religious life or those three annual celebrations that require the faithful to trek to the Temple from far and wide. This one was Shavuot, "The Festival of Weeks," a harvest festival fifty days after Passover when the first harvest was in and people brought the first fruits of that harvest to the Temple to offer to God.

This was no somber event—it was a celebration with dancing and singing, instruments and drums and special stories from scripture. The gifts were brought to the Temple—gifts proportional to the gifts God had given. And all people were invited—the rich and the poor, the servants and the landowners, the aliens and the orphans, those whole in mind and body, and those lame and in pain.

It was a noisy, crowded, and lively place, one with a cacophony of sound, of voices speaking in the languages of the known world. And into that noise came another distraction on the Pentecost just fifty days after Jesus' Resurrection. It must have been some distraction to grab attention in the midst of such an event!

Priest and preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor describes it like this ('from "The Gospel of the Holy Spirit" in *Home By Another Way*, pp. 143-144):

What do you suppose would happen here if we arrived for worship on some high Holy Day only to find such a ruckus going on? Some of us might cower in the corner hoping for it to go away. Perhaps some would try to stop the disturbance and escort the strangers out the

door so we could get back to our usual, comfortable, predictable worship. Some of us, I suppose, would sneer and say, "They are drunk—filled with new wine!" Would any of us be amazed, ask "What does this mean?" Stay to listen?

Would we, do you think? Listen, I mean. Really listen. In our 21st century church, do we—can we—still believe in a God who would do something like this? A God who could take a group of frightened and weary disciples who were wondering what would come next in their lives now that their leader was gone, wondering how they could possibly carry out the commission Jesus had given them, wondering if they shouldn't just cash it in and go back to Galilee for good. A God who could and would transform them into a cohesive band of brave and passionate witnesses capable of going into the streets to proclaim Christ without regard to whether they would be called drunks or be persecuted or thrown into prison.

Do we still believe in a God like that? Or, (BBT again, p. 145) "have we come to an unspoken agreement that our God is pretty old and tired by now, someone to whom we can address our prayer requests but not anyone we can really expect to change our lives?"

The Holy Spirit is a scary thing—not always just the "Spirit of Gentleness" the comforting, encouraging presence that guides and inspires, that feeds our souls and brings us peace and joy in the midst of our chaotic lives, our pain and our stress. It is that, of course, but that is not all. The biblical images are not of gentle breezes but hurricane force winds and searing fire—a burning bush, divided tongues of flame. Strong images that don't so much urge as turn upside down and transform! For only through such transformation could the church have come into being. With just the comforting and encouraging nudges, the disciples would probably have formed a committee to study the feasibility of going out into the streets and to the ends of the world. And it would have died in committee—or still, to this day, be tabled for further study!

Everyone seems to be worried about the church today in the 21st century. And indeed, we are often weary and discouraged, wondering what will come next, how we "can survive and remain "relevant" in a society like ours. Have we forgotten what the church is, the Body of Christ that exists only because God has breathed life into it? A body that has no life of its own, no reason for being *except* to carry on the ministry Jesus?

Now, of course our churches serve other purposes for us—places of fellowship and friendship, for example. But have these other purposes become the reason for being and thus obscured, made secondary, what is most important? We seek growth and new members, but is that to get more pledges and more bodies to maintain what we have? Or is the growth the *result* of a meaningful witness to the realm of God?

Some have said that mainline churches have lost the Holy Spirit. In fact, just a few years ago, a large national study was published that showed how few people in mainline churches had an expectation of encountering God when coming to worship! Maybe it was an attempt to distance from more charismatic Christians, from Pentecostals, who do emotional things in

worship that seem out of control to us. It is far easier to depend upon what we know—facts, figures, our business experience, what we can observe, what we think we can control. One of the hardest things in the world is to trust in the Holy Spirit, some-thing that can't be seen and that we tend not to recognize in our own lives or the life of our church. The problem is, we can so easily choke off the Spirit. We forget how to be surprised. Church may be the last place we expect something significant to happen to us. And, the truth is, maybe we don't want to be surprised because that may mean that things will change. For certain, if you don't want change, don't pray for the Holy Spirit to come!

I have become more positive, though. I think I see signs that the mainline church is beginning to change--that we may be at the start of a new Pentecost. I hope that is true.

It was my friend Eric Law, a Chinese-American priest who specializes in multicultural communications and the dynamics of change who first taught me that the miracle of Pentecost was not a miracle of speaking. This was a miracle of *hearing*. That a diverse group who didn't understand each others' languages—let alone the language of the speakers—could still hear the same Gospel message. (What happened that day was not the same as the speaking in tongues that Paul includes in the gifts of the spirit. Speaking in tongues is a divine language that is not understandable by others.)

It was a miracle of changing frightened, grieving disciples into a spirit-filled force that could make something new. It was a miracle of the diverse hearers being willing to take a chance on this new thing. It was a miracle that made it possible that what Jesus had begun could go forth to the ends of the earth because the church—the disciples, the people gathered in Jerusalem that day, those who were to be converted in the days to come, you, me, all of us—would carry on that ministry and mission through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is a miracle that plays out in the local church, in our denominations, when we are awake and aware--and expectant that the Holy Spirit is present and acting. The stories in Acts of the Apostles, the stories of the birth and development of the early church are good models for us. When Jesus charged the disciples to go into the world to make more disciples, he sent the Holy Spirit to guide them. He did not equip them with a rule book or a road map. They didn't fully know what they were to do or where they were to go. Preaching the Gospel to the ends of the earth did not happen instantaneously. Their mission un-folded as they allowed themselves to be lead—or pushed or pulled by the Spirit— into unpredictable and sometimes disturbing situations often at considerable risk. Little-by-little, step-by-step, they moved out from Jerusalem both geographically and across religious lines.

Little-by-little and step-by-step, the mission expanded. The net was cast wider and the walls began to come down. Now, to say that the spirit was moving and leading is not to say that the journey was easy or smooth sailing. All of these boundary crossings brought forth new issues. And please remember that this was *not* about excluding Jews but about expanding the message of salvation to all people! Down the line heated debates erupted between the traditionalists and those who had experienced firsthand the leading of the Spirit into new

religious territory. Debates that sometimes looked more like trials. There were critical questions to be answered about who was in and who was out. And, if all were to be “in,” how would the community be organized? What would be required of its members? Would they follow the old rules or were new rules needed? This meant that they began to confront challenges that required them to reexamine long held beliefs and practices. Did all people have to observe the Jewish laws—like dietary laws, circumcision, for example? They sometimes were called to move to a new understanding of what God considered to be acceptable. To let go of something that had been closely held as sacred.

What if, today, we find things that we need to let go? Do we have the kind of courage that would open us to respond to the same Spirit that is alive in us, in our own lives and in our church right here and now? Do we? That gentle and quiet Spirit that feeds us and sustains us—but also that awesome Spirit that endows us with power, the fire and wind of transformation that our church and our world needs so desperately.

Next Saturday at about this time, Marsha Vollkommer will come to the culmination of her years of study, practice, and discernment--years of being lead by the Holy Spirit. She will kneel here, and we will sing the 9th century words, *Veni Creator Spiritus, Come Holy Spirit*, summoning--or, perhaps, acknowledging, the Spirit's presence and action in making her a priest.

I said this was the culmination for Marsha. But it is not the ending. In fact, it is the beginning--another beginning in these awesome days we call human life. She gets a fancy ceremony. But each of us has a ceremony, too. Our baptism, where we (or our parents and godparents on our behalf), acknowledge and claim our place in the community of God's people--being marked as God's own, forever. Beginnings, not endings.

Have you had Spirit sightings--a sense of the Holy Spirit present and acting in your own life or the life of the church? Will you share it with me? Will you call or e-mail me this week?

Amen and amen.