

BEAUTIFUL SPIRIT

Acts 2:1-21

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24 May 2015

Today is Pentecost, the birthday of the church, the day God's Spirit entered into the lives of the disciples and created a community and a mission. Today we think about that gift of God's Holy Spirit.

If I tell you I'm going to work on my spirituality, you might imagine me doing something like this (praying). If I invite you to go with me on a spiritual retreat, you might imagine a place like this (retreat center). In fact, about once a year, I stay in this little hermitage cabin all by myself. The extroverts in my life can't quite imagine how I stand it, much less why I like it.

The word "spiritual" conjures up images of personal piety. It might even bring to mind a picture of a convent or a monastery. We think about quiet, about the inner life.

But there are lots of interesting word associations. For example, these are called "spirits" (picture of liquor bottle).

And how about this book, which is a best seller? (Raising Your Spirited Child) It is not a book about parenting the mellow child. It is a book which contains advice for parenting children who are described as "intense."

"Spirit" has more than one meaning. In many languages, the word for "spirit" and the word for "breath" are similar or exactly the same. When God gives us breath, God is giving us spirit. Some people have a quiet spirit, some have a more exuberant spirit, but in all of us, the spiritual part of our lives is the part that connects us with God.

I like to think of the Holy Spirit as a connection, a conduit. It is our means of connecting with the divine. So spiritual practices are those habits which help us maintain our relationship with God. For some people, solitude and meditation work. For others, singing and music provide that touch point. Sharing meals with other people, performing acts of service, pilgrimages to places we find sacred: all of these experiences can be spiritual.

There was nothing quiet or serene about the way the Holy Spirit emerged upon the disciples, fifty days after Easter. No, when the Spirit entered, the only way people could describe it was by drawing upon two images from human life: fire and wind. Fire and wind are both elements which can easily become uncontrolled and dangerous.

The Holy Spirit's presence, then, is not only calming and centering. It not only brings peace. Though it does all those things. When the Holy Spirit enters our lives, it also disrupts us, and our lives, and potentially everything around us. The Spirit of God working within us is unpredictable, and dangerous to the status quo. The Holy Spirit is never expected and rarely respectable.

One of my favorite word plays is this one: the word "enthusiasm", which literally means : "God within you." If you are enthusiastic, you are living out of God's presence within you. That presence is what gives you your spirit – and, as our choir sometimes reminds us, "How can I keep from singing?" If you have a fire burning within you, it will show.

Doesn't all this mean that if we have the spirit of God, we will live with passion and enthusiasm? That if the church has the spirit of God, that church will be anything but boring?

Why wouldn't God's spirit usher in a sense of excitement? We were wired to crave a certain amount of excitement. Didn't God create us this way? To crave more than ordinary, normal existence? Isn't it why we have holidays? Because from time to time we need to be lifted above our regular days? Isn't it why we so desperately want to have a winning sports team? We long for that euphoria that comes when a mass of people are all cheering a winner. Whether you get chills from the Cleveland Orchestra or from a rock concert, music can transport us. Some of you will ride the roller coasters at Cedar Point this summer, and others of you will find your biggest thrills pulling in perch and walleye. All of them experiences out of the ordinary, experiences, we say, that can lift our spirits.

No one wants to feel as if their life is dull and plodding. Some people might like routine, and find it comforting, but none of us like to be bored. It's natural for us to seek excitement or a change of pace from time to time.

Some excitement is harmless and does nothing more than provide a temporary diversion. But sometimes a diversion ends up creating untold harm and pain, to us and to our relationships.

Wisdom is knowing which experiences to choose which bring us closer to our true selves.

You can go to a terrific play, a musical with songs that leave you humming, outstanding dance, fabulous acting, and you will still feel the glow from that experience for the next few days. The same could be true for going to a concert, an art exhibit, or reading a great book. Art lifts us up above the mundane and reminds us that there is

more to life than going to work or school, paying the bills, and just getting through the days.

I contend, though, that there is a difference between an experience that lifts our spirits and a spiritual experience.

A spiritual experience causes us to live differently. The ecstasy of other experiences fades away, leaving us much the same people. We might smile when we see our ticket stub from the winning game or souvenir from a fabulous vacation, but those events don't change us at our core. A spiritually transformative experience will mean that we're different from that moment on.

What transforms us are ideas and relationships. If you go to the art museum and get the idea that you want to get out your paint brush and paint again, that may change your life.

If you spend time in prayer and decide that God is calling you to forgive a person in your family against whom you've held a grudge for years, that may change your life.

The Day of Pentecost was a day of energy, and ideas, and the spark of new relationships. On that day, the group of disciples who had been spending their time mourning Jesus and trying to figure out what to do in his absence, suddenly became united, not in their grief but in new life. They were made into one body, the church, and given a mission - to share good news with others. On that day, they were given a new relationship with God and with each other, and they were given the idea that they could live together in community, sharing the values that Jesus had taught and lived.

God's Holy Spirit is a gift to us, as individuals and as a group. It is always a both/and. It doesn't just come to a group, and it doesn't just come to us personally. It

wants to spark something within us, to elevate us above the mundane concerns of our lives, to transform us from lives of survival to lives of abundance.

St. Catherine of Siena once said, "Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire." There is, within each of us, a divine spark, the spirit of God. When we discover our passion and purpose, and live it into the world, our lives are transformed, for our sake and for the sake of others. As a church, we are called to recognize and name the talents of each other, bringing out those gifts and encouraging them. When a group of people, all under the same roof, begins living these animated, enthusiastic spirited lives, there will be a buzz - like a current of electricity - that darts throughout the place. It will be like wind or fire, something that cannot be controlled. I feel that energy sometimes in this place and among these people and it is a gift from God.

About 200 years after Pentecost, after the birth of the church, one of the church fathers, a man named Irenaeus wrote this, "The glory of God is the human person who is fully alive."

May it be so for us, as individuals and as this one body in Christ, that we tap into the spirit of God and discover the joy of abundant life.