

## Pentecost + June 12, 2011

A couple of weeks ago, I celebrated my birthday and much to my surprise, Britt managed to sneak a chocolate cake and candles into this place. It was Wednesday, the day I usually eat lunch with the Bible Study group so it was the perfect occasion for sharing the cake. Much to my surprise, Marge Johnson had a similar idea and brought in a luscious ice cream cake. Well, I brought one cake home and shared one with the folks here. Given my advanced years, the cake we had at lunch was too small to hold candles numbering my years. We had a few candles anyway and before it was time to blow them out, someone made the proverbial suggestion: "Make a wish." Now, you've probably heard the warning, "Be careful what you wish for..." The implication, of course is that if what you wish for really comes true it might be more than you can handle. Maybe that came to my mind. I don't know but I do remember pausing a moment or two, not knowing whether I should make a wish then deciding to forgo the wish and said a silent prayer instead.

Today is a birthday of sorts. Today is Pentecost and Pentecost is often described as the *birthday of the church*. Imagine if we were to have a birthday cake for this auspicious occasion? Given the age of the Christian church there would be a lot of candles ... something like 2,000 of them. It would take the entire congregation to extinguish them. Then, if we were to observe birthday custom and first make a wish, what would it be? What would you wish for? What would be your wish for the church not only in this place but the church in all places? Better yet, maybe we would replace our wishes with a prayer ... a prayer like *Veni Sancte Spiritus* - Come, Holy Spirit.

Come, Holy Spirit. This is our prayer for today. Better to pray that prayer than to merely express our wishes. In a way it is a dangerous prayer more dangerous than our wishes. "Come, Holy Spirit" is a dangerous prayer because God's Spirit usually comes in ways that are radically different than our wishes. God Spirit comes to stir us up, to disrupt us, to do a new thing, and to break our grip on being in control. God's Spirit comes in ways we least expect. God usually surprises us!

Pentecost was originally a Jewish festival celebrating the Spring harvest fifty days after Passover. Later, it became a day to celebrate the giving of God's law. We celebrate it on this fiftieth and final day of Easter as the completion of Jesus' resurrection. What we celebrate and remember today is the great surprise that occurred that day among the apostles gathered together with several other supporters of Jesus. They waited and prayed following Jesus' ascension and suddenly, out of the blue, the Spirit descended like a strong wind. It spread like wildfire. It must have been quite a site! Meanwhile, the pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem from all over the world for the festival heard the commotion and heard something rather amazing. They heard among the cacophony of speech their own language. Some were really curious. They asked, "What's going on?" Others sneered and said that this band of Jesus supporters was drunk with wine.

With that Peter stood up and began to preach and explain that this strange and awesome event was nothing other than the Spirit of the Risen Jesus poured out as promised. This was a brand new day. The church was born. Suddenly, this band of Jesus believers was given God's own power. Now, they could be the church equipped for ministry and mission and it would lead them beyond Jerusalem and into every corner of the world. The Spirit came, much to their surprise and quite unexpectedly to intrude, disrupt, and give these early Jesus followers *power to go beyond themselves, draw them into the a greater sense of community and give this a public face.*

Much of the time we have a tendency to imagine the Spirit as something interior, something private, a power that resides only inside of us. You have, no doubt, heard the popular creed: "I'm spiritual not religious." The idea is that if you have spirit of are spiritual then it is something strictly private and maybe a matter of personal taste or preference and with such a scenario one certainly doesn't need the church.

But, oh, how the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Pentecost, testifies to a different reality. It is anything but private. The Spirit accomplishes nothing less than the creation of a new community, a brand new reality, and it does not keep that new church safe inside their room. No sooner does the Spirit descend than they find themselves out on the streets. Peter begins to preach and then thousands are baptized and then the brand new, Spirit empowered church sets out to perform signs and wonders and continue the very work of Jesus. Nothing private here.

Last Wednesday night we had the final "Journey of Faith" session and reflected, among other things, on the Rite of Welcome. You might recall that when we welcomed these new people into our community last December, sponsors for each of the candidates traced the cross on the inquirers ears, eyes, and mouth, and heart, feet with the admonition to hear the good news, worship God and follow in the ways of Jesus. One of our group admitted that standing in front of the entire assembly for this Rite made her feel more than a little uncomfortable. She said she felt conspicuous. She had a long standing sense that the business of being Christian was personal or private but in receiving the cross in such a public way she concluded that there was nothing private about this faith business. Another person in the group shared how she had the sense that she was part of something greater than herself; still another shared how it became clear that Jesus claim on her life was all-embracing.

These testimonies bear witness to the power of Pentecost. Being Christian is no private matter. Every time I reflect on the baptismal covenant and the promises we make, I am reminded of this truth. Whenever I speak to people involved in trips to Mexico or the Gathering Inn or the Food Closet or their daily walk in their places of work and at home or at play I hear the same thing. We are called to life in community, common worship and a vocation in the world at home, work, and play that is all very public: to share the good news, to serve all people, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth. And in that adventure the Spirit is very busy sometimes taking us places we may not want to go, taking us beyond our comfort levels, prodding, provoking and

surprising us. Isn't that how it is in the complex world of relationships ... it is rarely neat and often messy.

I recently learned that in the Celtic tradition the symbol for the Holy Spirit isn't the dove but a goose. A wild goose! The way it was explained to me was that a dove is too docile and delicate. A goose is wild and uncontrollable. As I've been pondering that over the past week, I've come to believe that's a pretty accurate image of the Holy Spirit: wild, free, unpredictable. You know geese – they are noisy and raucous, always on the move. Well, that the Holy Spirit for you. We don't know where the Spirit comes from or where the Spirit will lead us. I wish I could give you seven simple steps on how to live out this life of faith, but I cannot. It is, with the help of prayer and worship and a supportive community, a summons to prayer and radical trust. Come, Holy Spirit. May that be our prayer not only today but each day as we surrender to the awesome reality of God working in and through us.

Come, Holy Spirit is a good prayer ... a dangerous prayer ... and chances are it will be better than anything you might wish. Amen.