

June 12, 2011

The Day of Pentecost

John 7:37-39

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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The Holy Spirit that we are celebrating this day is above all the Spirit of Jesus poured out for the entire world. The consequence of that seemingly innocuous statement is that we can expect the Holy Spirit to do what Jesus did. The Holy Spirit is therefore an agent to change: personal change as we are shaped by what really matters in life and societal change as ever increasing numbers of people are able to share in enjoying a measure of peace with justice. Jesus said "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me, drink."

What we know about Jesus' ministry is that he made clear that the poor and the disenfranchised were explicitly included in the abundance of God's grace available to everyone. And that this message included conflict as a consequence. So the question in the midst of this celebration becomes how can we tell when the Holy Spirit is at work?

In the realm of personal change, that question has often been answered by looking for manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit of which Paul writes in his Corinthian correspondence. I still remember being part of a group who gathered for prayer one night when something truly mystical happened. I can only describe it as the particular and palpable presence of God among us in that room. Within a week everyone who had been present in that room had experienced the gift of speaking in tongues, and manifestations of spiritual gifts became part of the life of our group as we were being changed and challenged and equipped for evangelical work. Just as with the wider church as the 'charismatic movement' of the 70s and 80s resulted in conflict as the powers tried to manage this new thing, so these gifts were controversial to a degree in our group. They undermined our own sense of rhythm and order. How were we to know that these strange things like speaking in tongues were the action of the Holy Spirit and not some gobbledygook or work of the devil, disrupting the mission of the church? What were the changes brought about in us and were they the kind of changes that were a consequence of Jesus' ministry in his place and time?

We can ask the same questions when we look at the work of societal change. How are we to know whether the civil rights movement here or the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa was the work of the Spirit? It seems almost heretical to ask the question, but the answer was not so obvious in the midst of the conflicts around those changes. Much of our society is still resisting change with respect to gay and lesbian people and the conflict is deep and real with people on both sides of the issue claiming that they know what the work of God is and what is not. We need to pray for our Lutheran and Presbyterian friends as their communities are

being torn as ours has been in the past over these deep questions of right and wrong. How are we to tell?

Is it possible that the 'Arab Spring' is movement of the Holy Spirit? And why might I ask about that and not about the work of the Taliban who clearly believe that they are on the side of the angels restraining purity to the faith? (I was not really afraid of them until I realized that 'Taliban' essentially means 'seminarian' and imagined putting seminarians in charge of the world.)

The first answer is that many of these movements claim to be the kind of liberation that results for everybody when the outcast is included, when the poor who are by tradition and definition outside of the possibility of God's love have good news preached to them, and when there is no need to create enemies or scapegoats. The movements toward religious purity, often a kind of fundamentalism, like the Taliban, always fail that test.

The second way in which we do the work of discernment is 'after the fact'. We often recognize the working of the Holy Spirit after the fact, by "testing all things and holding fast to that which is good"¹. We can discern the actions of the Holy Spirit not only by seeing that they have the kind of effect in the world that Jesus had in his own ministry, but also, we are told, we may be assured of the work of the Spirit by seeing the fruits of that work in the world and our lives: "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."² Do the movements of personal and societal change, even in the intensity of conflict, result in an increase of peace and self-control and kindness?

I've been enjoying Erik Larson's latest history called *In the Garden of the Beasts*³. It is the story of a history professor, William Dodd who was appointed Ambassador to Germany in the 1930s and who awoke very slowly to the realities that came along with Hitler's rise to power, especially with respect to the persecution of Jews. He, in common with many of his friends, had a tendency to blame the victims for their persecution, suggesting that perhaps the Jews were really a bit prominent and were bound to make enemies. At one point his daughter, Martha, has a conversation with one of her lovers, a Russian diplomat and likely spy called Boris Winogradov. In an effort to suggest that her family had deep roots in America and its history she mentioned that both her parents' families had at one point owned slaves. Boris was rather shocked at what appeared to be her pride in this particular piece of history and said something to her that began to awaken a genuine sense of fellow feeling for those who were suffering and oppressed. He said "I too am also of ancient lineage, even older than yours. I am a direct descendant of Neanderthal man. And pure? Yes, *pure human*". Larson said "They collapsed against each other with laughter."⁴

¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:21

² Galatians 5:22-23

³ New York: Crown (Random House), 2011

⁴ *Beasts*, p.124

Laughter rather than condemnation and enmity. Challenge born out of love. Truth revealed in ways that unite and build up rather than separate and break down. No need for power struggle when everyone wins. No need for fear and enmity. Are these not marks of the Holy Spirit at work? And is this not that for which we all thirst? Jesus says "Let the one who puts their trust in me come to the well of the Holy Spirit, put the chalice to your lips, and drink that you too may share in the promise of the Gospel of peace.

In a time of silence and in response to the gospel I invite you to pray that the Holy Spirit will fall on us anew this day and in the days to come.