

A Spirit-Formed Faith

Acts 2:1-21, Revelation 2:29

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Day of Pentecost / Faith Formation Sunday

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I.

I grew up in a church where we had birthday cake on Pentecost. Every year for Pentecost the church would be decked out in red, and we'd sing spirituals and worship together; And then we'd go to coffee hour, where there would be balloons and streamers, and a giant, pure-white sheet cake with red frosting that spelled out "Happy Birthday" with frosting-flames for decoration. Growing up, one thing I learned was that Pentecost meant birthday cake. Have you heard of this tradition? I'm not sure about the cake part, but it's a common practice in Protestant churches to say that Pentecost is the "birthday of the church." Basically, the idea is that the Christian church is born in this moment, when Jesus has ascended into heaven, and then the Holy Spirit comes down from heaven to fill the people. And they need a leader to interpret what's happening, so Peter recalls the words of the prophet Joel, and preaches to them— and this is the very beginning of the church— there's the preacher, the congregation, and a burgeoning theology. And the institution of the Christian church is born.

II.

Now, I'm never going to say that there shouldn't be cake at coffee hour! But saying Pentecost is the birthday of the church has some problematic implications—I'm going to name three of them. One problem with the sheet-cake Pentecost is that it makes a thrilling, blow-the-doors-off the house with rushing wind, fiery tongues-of-flame story into a saccharine tale of sentimentality. Maybe mainline Protestants, and I can say this because I am one, are a little afraid of the power and depth and wildness of the Holy Spirit, and so we try to contain her by telling this story to ourselves with a tidy and sweet conclusion— oh, it's the birthday of the church, how nice! What I'm saying is that maybe we are tempted to try

to domesticate the Holy Spirit; the disciples sit in their house and a wind rushes in— maybe we want to bring the Holy Spirit into our “house” and claim her for ourselves—as if we can capture that energy and keep it safe. There is nothing “safe” about the Holy Spirit.

This brings us to another problem with the way this story is usually interpreted. Sometimes Christians are tempted to say that Pentecost is the moment when the Holy Spirit descends upon the earth—as if there could be a time in the history of the Earth, when the Holy Spirit did not exist. As if she hasn’t been with the people, with Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Ruth and Naomi, Mary and Joseph, Jesus and the Disciples, all along. As if the Holy Spirit can be divorced from her union with the God of Creation and the ministry of Jesus. As if Christianity is the only religion in which the Holy Spirit moves and dwells and inspires. There is nothing “disconnected” about the Holy Spirit.

And thirdly, the problem with how we hear this story is that to our modern ears, the story of Pentecost sounds pretty outrageous— to the point where we might miss how radical it is. Maybe this is a moment when our usually-healthy skepticism gets in our way. We so often hear the story of people gathered in a rumbling, spirit-filled house, who suddenly can speak and understand one another in their own languages— not the language of the colonizer, but their very own native tongues—and we place ourselves with the “they” of verse 7, the ones who wonder what’s happening in that house (maybe they’re drunk?). Rather than hearing the subversive nature of the Spirit, the way she conspires to make people who are so different from each other find understanding— instead of hearing a text for the marginalized, it’s easy for white, middle class, mainline Protestant listeners to fall into skepticism. So often, we wear our certainty like a cloak— and this prevents us from listening— truly listening— for the ways this story might wash over us and inform our theology. There is nothing “mainstream” or “logical” about the Holy Spirit.

So—if there is nothing “safe” or “disconnected” or “mainstream” or “logical” about the Holy Spirit, what new wisdom we might hear in this story? How can we follow the advice of the Book of Revelation and “hear

what the Spirit is saying to our church” this Faith Formation and Pentecost Sunday?

III.

On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit rushes into the house—in Greek the “ton oikon” –where the people are gathered. Today I want to ask, what if the “ton oikon,” what if the “house” is each of us? What if our own bodies are the “house” where the Spirit might rush in, and inspire us in our learning and understanding? And what if we, like the disciples at Pentecost, take that understanding and use it to increase peace in the world?

The story of Pentecost is truly sensual (not romantically sensual, but sensory-sensual!)– the sight of fiery flames, the sound of rushing wind, the heat of tongues of fire, the feeling of being amazed. All of this sensory appeal could be healing for us—we who are so awash in consumerism and technology—I’d like to propose that bathing ourselves in the basic imagery of the Pentecost story might restore in us healing wonder and mystery.

And perhaps the most important sense in the story is that of sound. We hear rushing wind, many different languages spoken aloud. We hear the crowd mulling around outside the house, and the sound of Peter’s voice quoting the prophet. Pentecost is a miracle of hearing. I’d like to propose, on this Pentecost & Faith Formation Sunday, that faith formation is also a miracle of hearing. So much of being formed in faith is about deep listening. We listen for the whispers of God in Bible stories. We put our ears to the ground and listen for God moving in our lives. We hear the ruffling of the Spirit’s wings in the community we create. Faith formation is a miracle of hearing because it requires us to listen for the ways the Spirit-wind might be moving through us.

The field of Faith Formation has really expanded its understanding of what it means to be formed in the Christian faith. We used to call Faith Formation, “Christian Education.” And by Christian Education, we typically meant children sitting in a Sunday School room like vessels waiting to be filled with information. The adult teacher imparted how to

interpret Bible stories so that the students would know “the truth” and how to be a Christian.

But faith formation– the faith formation that happens in our church–is more holistic than that. Our church’s hope is that people are formed in their faith through worship, and singing, going on mission trips, attending workshops and classes...and that we are always learning about God’s Love. Faith formation really involves our head-hands-heart. And, it’s not just education for children– because we are formed, re-formed, and transformed in faith our whole lifetimes. If you come to church for a few years, you might begin to notice that we tell the same stories in a cycle. It’s like a spiral, where each time we revisit a Bible story, we have another opportunity to actively reach for understanding that will help us grow. We’re all somewhere different in the spiral–based on lots of variables– like how much life experience we have, how much church experience we have, and how much capacity we have to nourish our own faith lives at any given moment. It’s not static at all. But each of us is on a journey with our faith, and through deep listening we invite the Holy Spirit into our “ton oikon,” our “house,” to participate in the miracle of hearing that is faith formation.

IV.

Faith Formation embraces mystery, deep listening, and requires that we open ourselves up to being surprised. It subverts the usual paradigm of teacher-as-expert and acknowledges that we don’t have all the answers but together we can ask the questions. Done well, Faith Formation invites the Holy Spirit into our midst–in all her wild glory–and welcomes an indwelling of the wind of inspiration and the fire of understanding. But like that first Pentecost, this is the blessing we cannot speak by ourselves– we are called to go out to “practice Pentecost” by living into inclusion, being open to God by listening to the Spirit, seeking justice, and striving in faith. Amen.