

June 4, 2017

Pentecost – Willing to Hear, Willing to Follow

PRAYER

May the words of my mouth be mediations of our hearts and be always acceptable unto Thee. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. AMEN

SERMON

Today we celebrate the day of Pentecost, fifty days after the resurrection. We hear about it in the Acts of the apostles. It is cited as a kind of birthday for the church. The story of Pentecost is always a kind of an exciting one. The disciples are gathered around the temple and suddenly the Spirit of God comes upon them. Unasked for, unexpected, it seems. They were simply carrying out the duties that they believe they were called to do, to witness who Jesus was. They've had the opportunity to experience the risen Lord on several occasions at this point. A lot of their fear is gone. But now the Spirit comes upon them in a very spectacular way.

There is a visible sign of the Holy Spirit, comes as a fire we are told. And it touches them in such a way that their hearts and minds are freed. And they are able to begin to tell the mighty acts of God to all the people that are gathered around them. People from different parts of the world. In languages that they could understand so that they could hear what the disciples had to share with them. The mighty acts of God and who Jesus was and what he had accomplished in his life, his death, and in his resurrection. It was an exciting time. It was a miraculous time.

The people were confused. It took them awhile to begin to understand what exactly was going on. Peter tries to explain to the people gathered that this is not gibberish and this is not drunkenness. But this is what they were called to do. To share with the people and all the people what the mighty acts of God were. And that they were being invited to this great thing called the Kingdom of God. And they were invited to be included into this new community called the ecclesia. And he tells them citing Old Testament that this had been predicted. That God had said to the people, the chosen people of God, that there would come a time when all people who believed would have the Holy Spirit. They would be able to prophesy. They would be able to live according to the will of God in a way that was different than they were under the law.

So, this was that moment of giving. This is that moment that Jesus had talked about at the festival. That the time was coming when they would receive the Holy Spirit, the opportunity to receive the Holy Spirit and it would become a part of their life on a daily basis. The Holy Spirit had come upon certain individuals over a time that the chosen people lived out their lives. It came upon Moses, it came upon David. There were many others who received the Holy Spirit for a time. But now was a time when the Holy Spirit would be giving to God's believers. And it would be a part of their lives.

Paul talks to the people of Corinth in his letter about the Spirit of God. Because there were so many questions about the Holy Spirit. This community called the church was new and they were trying to understand what everything was about. They had heard the gospel from Paul. But things were going on in this community called the church. And some were speaking in tongues and some were speaking wisdom that they had. They wanted to know more. They wanted to know how this thing worked.

So many times, we hear that when people were baptized once they had heard the gospel. They were baptized because the Holy Spirit came upon them. And it was something that was tangible. Something that they could feel. Something that sometimes you could see. And they want to know more about this Holy Spirit thing.

And what are the gifts of the Holy Spirit? Because we see a lot of different manifestations. Which ones are of the Spirit of God and which ones maybe are not? And Paul tries to explain to them that all these things that they see where people are being freed, to teach and to preach. To prophesy, to speak wisdom. All these were gifts of the Holy Spirit. And that the Holy Spirit gave the gifts as was necessary. As was needed for the community. So that the community could move forward. So, the community could live out being the church. To be free from fear. To be free to tell the acts of God. To be freed to lift one another up. To lead prayer. To preach to the congregation. All these were gifts of the Spirit. And what they really needed to know was that the Spirit was present in them all. And that it would manifest itself as needed. And through whom, the Holy Spirit felt needed to be the leader at any given moment.

You know there's probably less understood about the Holy Spirit in the church today than probably at any time in the history of the church other than in the very beginning. So, it is important for us to draw from Paul. And it's important for us to draw from Acts to see and begin to understand a little bit more about the Holy Spirit. And how it is given and why it is given. And how it is a part of our lives.

So many times, because of the coming of the Holy Spirit of Pentecost and because of the gifts that Paul tells the church in Corinth are manifestations of the Holy Spirit. We have this idea and this feeling that the Holy Spirit is only present in miraculous kind of things. Very exciting, very obvious kind of things. We think that maybe only the church leaders, someone like Michael Curry our presiding bishop, manifests the Holy Spirit. And there's nothing further from the truth. The Holy Spirit dwells in each of us, in each of you.

Some of you are probably saying, well I've never really felt the Holy Spirit. I was baptized and there was no dove that came down and no tongue of fire and I didn't immediately start telling the mighty acts of God in languages that I didn't understand. I've been told by others in years past, that unless I spoke in tongues that I really don't have the Holy Spirit. I was told that as a matter of fact when I was younger. That there was some kind of a litmus test that you had to be able to do this or that to really know that you had the Holy Spirit. To that I say, wrong.

You have the Holy Spirit because that's God's promise to you. You have the Holy Spirit as part of your life. If you've been baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit you have the Holy Spirit as part of your life. It's do you call upon it. You invite the Holy Spirit to be a part of the living of your life as you are making decisions.

So many times, we only call on God and the Holy Spirit when we're asking for an intervention. God come into this part of this person's life, to heal this person, to strengthen that person. How many times do we ask the Holy Spirit to be a part of the living of our day? To show us, to open our eyes to the world around us. To see the need, to see the opportunities, to share the mighty acts of God. How often when we sit down for devotions pray first for the Holy Spirit to open our hearts and our minds? To know and to understand what God is trying to say to us in our time, in our situation.

As we look at what's going on in our life, whether it's a time of peacefulness or whether it's a time of trauma. Do we invite the Holy Spirit to open us? So that we can first know and understand God's will for us in the living of our life and the living of that day. Or do we wait until we are at the last rung of the ladder? Holding on to the last little bit of rope saying, "God I finally give up, I can't do it on my own. Please help me, intervene, take this away from me. Do whatever's necessary." We don't have to wait for that. The Holy Spirit is present and the Holy Spirit will speak to us, to our hearts and to our minds when we give room in our lives. Silence in our lives, when we invite the Holy Spirit to participate in what we are doing.

This last week we had our Sharing Faith dinners and there were about twenty-four give or take folks that, adults that had participated in those dinners. We had three different dinners. They were answering questions about their life of faith. And they could choose which one of the packs of cards with questions or statements to respond to. And we got to choose which one we wanted to share. We're Episcopalians we are not used to just doing this off the cuff. We need some guidance. And one of the cards that I choose to take and respond to was to tell about a time when the Holy Spirit broke into my life in a very powerful way. And that was, one it was fairly easy for me to answer because a situation stuck out in my mind. And it was one of those kind of miraculous, not inviting the Holy Spirit to be a part although I had asked the Holy Spirit to be a part of the decision that I was trying to make.

But the answer came at such a strange time in my life that it was kind of out of the blue. It wasn't when I was actually thinking about the decision that I had to make. The story I shared with them was when I was at St. Peter's Bon Secour and I had interviewed with the Bishop to be the director of Beckwith Camp and Conference Center. And I was trying, I had been offered the position. And I was trying to decide if that's really where I needed to be and if it's really what I wanted to do. I mean I had been director at St. Peter's Bon Secour for three years and things were going well. For the most part, the people liked me. For the most part I liked them. Things were going well, it was kind of a peaceful time. We were past that period of getting to know each other and building up trust. And we were starting to do new things and different things. It was a good time.

And now the bishop was asking me if I would go to Beckwith to become the executive director. And I was praying hard about that. I really needed God to help me, show me which way to go. And they had a tradition at St. Peter's, after the Gospel procession, they would actually sing a full stanza of the hymn as we came back to the front. That gave me time to kneel and to pray before preaching. And on that particular Sunday I was kneeling and I had just read the gospel of Jesus telling Peter that there was a time coming in his life where he would be led where to go not choose for himself. And that it would not be a real comfortable thing for him. Talking about Peter's crucifixion which would come much later.

And as I was preparing to preach and kneeling in prayer, suddenly it came to me. God was saying to me; the Holy Spirit was saying to me. You need to go to Beckwith. You need to take that position. That is the next step of what God wants for you. And it came to me so powerfully. I almost couldn't get up from kneeling to preach. It was really hard to recompose because it was absolutely clear. It was like a voice telling me, this is what I want you to do. I've never experienced that even in going through the Commission on Ministry to become a priest. I never received that kind of directive from God. And that's how it came to me that day, that Sunday. And the next day I called the bishop and said, "I accept the position."

We all deal with things that are going on in our lives. Every day is new. Every day we are going further in our pilgrimage of faith. Every day we are moving forward as Christians. Every day we have interactions with others where we have the possibility of sharing faith with the other. Listening in faithfulness. To be present with those who are sick. To be present with those who are worried, who are concerned. And we do not have to go into those situations alone. All we need to do is invite the Holy Spirit to be a part of our life and the living of that life that day. Or as we are going in to a particular situation, to ask the Holy Spirit to be present, to show us, to open our hearts, to open our minds. To hear what the other is saying. To respond not with our own words but with the words of God. That's what the Holy Spirit is about. Rarely is that miraculous kind of voice that directs us. More often, it is that presence that comes with us when invited. To help us to be calm in times of anxiety. To be present when we would rather be someplace else.

May you invite the Holy Spirit to be a part of the living of your life. That you may know the power of God's presence. That you might have the comfort of God's leading. To know that you are going in the path that God has chosen for you. Because you are willing to hear, and because you are willing to follow.

Father Gregory Hein