

“Anointed, Empowered, Tossed About, Claimed...by the Spirit”

A Pentecost Sermon

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Text: Romans 12:1-2, 4-12,21 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. ⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

PAUL, at this exact point in his letter to the church at Rome, is talking about Pentecost. Really, you say...I see several eyebrows raised in suspicion. But it is true; Pentecost happens precisely with the first sentence of the 12th chapter: “Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your lives as living testimonies, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship.” In other words, here comes the practical application of everything Paul has explained in the first 12 chapters. Paul has explained; now Paul exhorts: Get on with it! Do not be conformed to this world, be renewed; claim you own unique gifts, be part of the Pentecost!

Here is how Eugene Peterson translates the first two verses: “So here’s what I want you to do, God [read, Holy Spirit] helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life, your sleeping, eating, going-to-work and walking around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God. Don’t become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it, without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. “

And is not that what the Spirit did on that momentous, earth-shattering occasion 50 days after the Resurrection, 2006 years ago?

When the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Christ in Jerusalem on that first Pentecost, they were totally shaken out of their complacency and apathy. Suddenly they understood their mission and they embraced it. They became a force to be reckoned with. They became a fellowship unlike any the world had known before, and they became determined above all things to raise high the banner of Christ for their generation. The symbolism is so rich--a violent wind, tongues of fire, people hearing and understanding in their own language, observers utterly amazed. This is what happens when the Spirit comes. Our world is shaken. Our senses come alive. We know we stand on holy ground.

I know what it was like to be those disciples, huddled together before Pentecost – don't you? If not precisely like them, at least, we know what it is like to be frightened, to be discouraged and unable to find hope or vision or direction -- to be dry.

At our Wednesday prayer circle, Phoebe could hardly find words to express her distress, her grief, her dismay over the message from Al Gore about the environmental risks to our planet --specifically the irreparable melting of the polar icecap (and incidentally, I urge each of you to see Mr. Gore's important film, *an Inconvenient Truth*.)

There is much in our world to grieve about, to be fearful about. You have your list, I certainly have mine...the continuing pandemic of AIDS, after 25 years; continuing casualties in Iraq and new tales of torture and massacre; the widening gap between have's and have more's and have not's, reminding us poverty is the true weapon of mass destruction; polarizing pressures that are tearing us apart ...we can all echo the words of the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, "The anguish of the world is on my tongue. My bowl is filled to the brim with it; there is more than I can eat."

Haven't you felt, at least once, so dry, so hopeless, you just couldn't make it through the day, you had nothing to offer? There was no spirit left in you? Aren't we all cousins of those huddled disciples waiting for the Spirit?

I was that dry when I went East three weeks ago to a Preaching Conference – a festival of homiletics! I was tired and discouraged. I did not know exactly what I needed, but I went there searching for something from God, something of God.

I listened to the first few days of well-known, indeed exceptional preachers. But I still felt dry. I listened to Peter Gomes, inspirational preacher from Harvard Divinity School, and I was inspired but not renewed. Then James Forbes appeared. The Senior Pastor at Riverside Church in NYC, acclaimed as one of the 12 finest preacher in the English speaking world, got up and he started reading the words of the great mission hymn, "Christ You Give the Great Commission." Verse one: "Christ, you give the great commission. Heal the sick and preach the Word. Lest the church neglect its mission and the gospel go unheard. Help us witness to your purpose with renewed integrity." That was the word that reached me, *integrity*. The quality or condition of being whole or undivided; completeness. Moral soundness where what you believe or know inside is matched by your actions outside. In other words, the Spirit, the Pentecostal energy and courage, the strong sense of rightness for both shalom and shelem.

And then he read the words of the refrain: "With the Spirit's gifts empower me, for the work of ministry." And I knew there would be strength enough to keep on keeping on! This line, this refrain, prepared me for Pentecost! I was beginning to wake up, I was beginning to feel some living waters flow through my dried riverbeds, I started twitching – yes actually twitching -- for I finally was roused with an understanding of my call – our call. Because yes, our ministry, each ministry, your ministry, the particular ministry that calls each one of us, is WORK. We need God's infusion of energy and hope.

It is work that we cannot do alone! If you'll remember, Jesus did not start his ministry on his own. At baptism Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit, received the Holy Spirit, and then, only then, did God bless him by saying "You are my beloved Child." The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness and Jesus, still with the power of that Spirit, preached in the wilderness. The Spirit anointed him and sent him out, to preach, in his own words, good news to the poor, sight for the blind, freedom for the prisoner, release for the oppressed.

If we are going to do something about our lives and our world, if we are going to do something about revitalizing the church, claiming our Christian faith, speaking truth to power, liberating the poor and freeing the oppressed, saving the world and protecting not only our loved ones but all who are oppressed, including the earth itself, if we are going to do this, we must first experience something of God's holy anointing.

We are people of power, anointed with the Holy Spirit and led by the Holy Spirit. Today, God comes to do something to lift your spirit and renew, revitalize you for what you have to face each day in this world, in your place of service...whether that place is your home, your school, the streets, the office. Today the Spirit comes to remind us that God does not will anything; God wills something out of everything – and we are to take heart, be hearted. We must open ourselves to the Spirit, for we will never do it on our own, by with our own strength or will.

What does that mean? It means, in Paul's words, **DO NOT BE CONFORMED**. To conform means to seek to be identical with that which surrounds you. Certainly, we would think that no one would want a church that conforms to the world, which is shaped and molded by secular, non-Christian influences; but sadly that is one of the major criticisms hurled at the main-line denominations today. "Don't let the world squeeze you into its own mold." Remember Paul: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good ... Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the God ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:9, 11, 21).

"Do not be conformed" also means, claim your gifts – not some else's, but your own unique and particular gifts. I love the fact that when the great violinist Isaac Stern was asked why he chose the violin instead of, say, the piano. He answered "I have nice fingers. They fit the violin." His fingers led him to his music! Gifts do not have to be spectacular, they come in any shape or size. Nor are they necessarily a talent or expertise. Paul includes contributing with liberality, giving aid with zeal, doing acts of mercy with cheerfulness. Such gifts require only a recognition of a need or an opportunity. You may not even know you have a particular gift until you respond to a need.

Even our hurts can be turned into gifts. How many times have persons who have been through the valley of suffering been the ones who have been best able to minister to others who are walking through that same valley? When making an inventory of the things you might offer to God, do not ignore what may seem to be your weaker points.

God wants to use all of us as channels of grace. God is desperate to anoint the church with power. So we each must prime ourselves to be a conduit for the Spirit of God-- not a one-time zapping, but a process by which one comes to a fundamental awareness of God's expectation and appointment and guidance, moment by moment.

As we continue in God's Spirit, we find we have power to do that which before seemed to be impossible. The power of God through God's Word is limitless; it knows no bounds. If we truly believe this - as Paul did - we Christians will find power not only to transform our selves, but also our church, and even our world. With the power of the Spirit, we will be able to tackle all our "lists" of grievances and have hope and energy to spare!

What is the Spirit saying to you, today? For me, I think God wants me to take a few more chances, more risks in my life, to take more stands, to be more fully authentic, to trust the Spirit within myself What are you called to do differently, how are you called to be differently? What do you need?

