

Homily for Pentecost Sunday

Introduction

On this Pentecost Sunday we celebrate a most remarkable, dramatic historical event. It commemorates the appearance of the public face of the Church, when those frightened, timid followers of Jesus broke out of the house where they were hiding and began to proclaim the Risen Christ to the city of Jerusalem. Many call Pentecost "the birthday of the Church"; the New Testament tells us that 3000 people received baptism on that day, each on hearing the good news of Jesus in his or her own language.

This is what we celebrate today... and so much more.

I

Each time we profess our faith we call the Holy Spirit "the giver of life". Other words describe her [the Spirit is often assigned feminine qualities] as well: "vivifier" "energizer". The lovely image of the Spirit "hovering over the waters of the great abyss" at the dawn of creation also describes the work of Creator-Spirit.

And creation, we know, was not, is not a one-time event - it continues throughout the cosmos (in the last 18 years the Hubble telescope has dramatically demonstrated this ongoing creative power); Creator Spirit continues her work within the human person and the human family, in communities, in new productions of mind and spirit, in new biological life as well. We celebrate today a vibrant, passionate, loving divine Presence in all of creation. And our traditional prayer "Come Holy Spirit..." is as relevant today as when the earliest disciples awaited her, hiding out in Jerusalem 21 centuries ago.

My favorite American theologian, Elizabeth Johnson, puts it this way: "Patterns of enduring, delighting, suffering, sympathizing, participating, playing, and glorifying characterize the community of life between the Spirit and the world". The Spirit is indeed the "giver of life" as our Creed declares.

II

The question we asked ourselves as we planned this liturgy was: What does God-Spirit ask of me/us. And the planners had all kinds of answers.

As I reflected on this question after our planning and in preparation for this homily, I remembered the text from Luke's Gospel when Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth early in his public ministry and does the reading in the synagogue that Sabbath day. The text tells us that he FINDS the place in the Prophet Isaiah where it says of the Messiah - of Jesus - "The Spirit of God is upon me because [s/he] has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor... sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19)

I believe that the answer to our question about what God-Spirit asks of me/us can be found in these several mandates:

"Glad tidings to the poor" - daring to be different, daring to stand over against the priorities of our society; standing with those who are dismissed, marginalized, neglected

"Proclaiming liberty to captives" - working for justice in our immigration policies

"Recovery of sight to the blind" - overcoming the fear that blinds so many in our country and world

"Letting the oppressed go free" - doing in our own way what one of our congregants has done for several years as he works the legal system to liberate prisoners in Guantanamo.

"Proclaiming a year acceptable to the Lord" - striving to bring about the Jubilee ideal of the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament where right relations are restored in every aspect of human life.

And in all of this exercising patience; allowing for all opinions to be heard; being non-judgmental (something extremely important in a progressive community like ours, where it is easy to look down on other facets of the Church).

All of this is our response to the breath of the Creator Spirit in our times and in this place.

Conclusion

Let me conclude this reflection with two stories about the work of the Spirit. They are dramatic stories and absolutely true.

The first concerns the founder of the Congregation which serves Our Lady Queen of Peace Parish where I also serve. When he founded this missionary congregation, the Holy Spirit Fathers and Brothers, he soon sent several of them to Africa. Not one survived. Malaria, dysentery, and all other kinds of sickness killed each of those missionaries. As the founder received word of these untimely deaths, he stood in front of the Congregation in France and told them that he could no longer do this; that he could not stand sending out missionaries who would meet the same fate as their predecessors.

The story is that during the same night one after the other Spiritan priest and brother knocked at the founder's door to say "Send me; send me". Truly a work of the Creator Spirit.

The second story concerns the six Jesuit priests and their two women collaborators who were assassinated by a death squad at the University of Central America in 1989. Again, before the shock of that atrocity had worn off some 200 or more Jesuits from all over the world had volunteered to take the place of their martyred sisters and brothers in San Salvador. Again, surely the Holy Spirit at work.

Our experience of the Creator Spirit may be much less dramatic but it is no less real.

Happy Feast Day!