

TOO DEEP FOR WORDS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2009

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-27

Let your gospel, O Lord, come to us not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction. Amen.

Pentecost is usually celebrated in the church with a focus on the wild winds that swept over the disciples gathered in Jerusalem fifty days after the resurrection; that story from Acts 2 we read today.

There they were, seated in a house with tongues of fire dancing above their heads, the First Alert smoke sensors shrieking their warnings, and above that clamor, the languages of nations extant and long extinct were spoken and understood. It is a dramatic story, and one that is not easy to replicate in everyday life, even though our Pentecostal friends would have us invite the Spirit to excite and show evidence of the presence of God every Sunday, in the speaking of tongues and other manifestations. Such displays of unbridled enthusiasm are, of course, a Calvinist's nightmare.

On the other hand, of the three persons of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is the one about which most Presbyterians are least articulate. Our tradition has always been skeptical of emotion, the unexplained, and the overtly demonstrative. John Calvin emphasized the Sovereignty of God and saw a role for the Holy Spirit but mostly as an enlivening element linked to the preaching of the gospel and balanced by the rigorous criticism of the mind.

This is not exactly the way Paul saw it. The Spirit, for Paul, dwells as near as the blood in our veins, as close as the air in our lungs, interceding for us, he says, with sighs too deep for words. And yet this Spirit is quite distinct and separate from us at the same time. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. None of us, not even Pentecostals are very good at explaining the third person of the Trinity, and how that Spirit is made manifest.

There is an elder in this presbytery, Dr. Bob Washington, who has always asked every minister and every candidate for the ministry to expound before the presbytery his or her personal experience with the Holy Spirit. He asked me that question when I came here, and he has asked everyone else as well. Standing on tottering knees, blind to sight, and weakened somewhat now as the years have gone by, Elder Washington believes that a personal experience with the Holy Spirit is an essential for Christian ministry and Christian living. And Paul would not disagree.

Paul writes to the Romans, a congregation he has never met, and describes to them a world in which we live and move and have our being that enfolds two quite different dimensions. There is flesh and there is Spirit, he says. And these two

dimensions of life are often at odds with each other. So Paul devotes the better part of the eighth chapter of Romans to the dichotomy between them.

Now our tendency is to hear this distinction between the flesh and the Spirit as a stale and old discussion. Flesh is bad. Spirit is good. From **Portnoy's Complaint** to **Lady Chatterley's Lover**, to **Law & Order: SVU**, we are inundated with portrayals of the world of the Flesh. Victoria's Secret, she who has no secrets, would never show any profit were it not for the flesh that fires our desire.

But Paul's use of the word flesh, *soma* in Greek, from which we get such phrases as *psychosomatic*, is much broader than just sexuality, or passion, or desire. *Flesh* for Paul is a catch-all word meaning not just the body, but the world itself and all that is in it. It is the present moment, the here and now of living in our skin and passing our days limited by the ticking of the clock and the sands of the hourglass passing through the narrow.

Soma, flesh, in Paul's understanding of it is any yearning that would put the world above all else. Any desire or passion that keeps us earthbound rather than heaven directed.

Flesh and spirit are often at odds with each other, because the one would argue that earth is our home and the other would insist that heaven is our home and that the purpose of living is to bring the two together in our daily life.

Seen this way, the world of the Spirit, is not so much the opposite of flesh as it is the breath of life breathed into us, the way God kneeled down according to the story and breathed into the first beings the breath of life. Spirit is the hope that lies within us as well as beyond us. Spirit is the yearning of the bird to spread its wings and fly. The push of the child to try her legs, the innate desire to fulfill our best intentions and hopes; and even more, God's best intentions and hopes for us. Not to deny the bounds of earth, but to see it the better. Spirit is the confidence that a God of love who stands behind all that is, is in us and through us and beyond us as well.

Leander Keck, former Dean of Yale Divinity School, and a New Testament scholar has written,

The struggle between Spirit and flesh is not a battle between higher and lower natures between our bodily drives and our minds or spirits. Rather, the struggle is between the power of the... future and the power of the... present.¹

Which is another way of saying that as Christians we believe that the world that we see is not all there is. There is a dimension of life that does not run out. There is an unfolding to history that has no limitation. There is a meaning to our days that is more than what we see. And there is a presence of the Holy that is not so much separate from life as permeating through it, permeating in such a way that we know that presence of the Holy even in the flesh, here and now, as well as not yet.

Most people think that eternity starts when we die, that that's when we see God. But in reality, if Paul is right, eternity began a long time ago, embraces today, and will go on long after our flesh has returned to the earth and our bodies are committed to their final resting place. Paul would have us know that the world is alive with God, if only we will look and see. So he assures us on good account that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, not even the passing of time, or the fading of our flesh.

There are, of course, many people who believe that this is all there is to life, what you can see and touch and taste and hear. That the purpose of living is to gain as much wealth, to secure as much property, to have as much fun as possible, so that at life's end you will not have missed anything. Well, you can live life that way. You can do that, but it will not add one second to your span of days, nor necessarily fulfill you.

Paul would show us a more excellent way; he would have us understand that there is something more to life than what we *get* and what we *have*. Paul suggests the subtlety and yet the strength of this when he reminds us that we are not in the flesh, we are in the Spirit as Christians, because the Spirit of God dwells in us already, the spirit of Jesus Christ whom God has raised from the dead.

And because Christ dwells in us we have hope, knowing that the Spirit helps us in our weakness, and even though that is true... that we are weak at times and our faith falters, and sometimes we don't even know how to pray as we ought, it makes no difference. Because the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

Too deep for words, Paul says. It is that confidence beyond words that keeps us persevering when the odds are against us. It is seeing the way of the world, and not settling for the way it is. It is receiving the diagnosis but fighting valiantly anyway. It is leaning into life expecting that there is more to it than what meets the eye and trusting that underneath us are the everlasting arms. It is a hope and a prayer too deep for words.

So Paul says there is a love in God that reshapes who we are, draws us into a different place, a place where we can live free from the powers of this world that would have us conform to their shape and design. A love that gives us hope against all hope, confidence even when the world would take that from us.

Every now and then you hear about someone who is so apprehended by that Spirit that the lure and power of the world are overcome by it.²

Vedran Smailovic was known as the Cellist of Sarajevo. He played as principal cellist in that city's Philharmonic Orchestra. And while many heard him play in the symphony, he is most remembered for playing in a hole.

On May 27, 1992 bombs were dropping on Sarajevo. And one fell outside of Smailovic's window landing on hungry people standing in line for bread. The bombs killed 22 men, women, and children of the city and left a hole in the street filled with their blood.

The next day and every day thereafter for twenty two days, Vedran Smailovic emerged from his apartment dressed in concert tails. He placed a stool in the bomb crater and played his cello. He played a song of life. He played a song of hope stronger than fear, of good greater than evil, of bravery overpowering cowardice, of life overwhelming death. He gave witness to the Holy Spirit of God.

It was Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor for strings that he played, but it was a prayer that he played as well, a prayer too deep for words. It was the music of being human in the midst of inhumanity. It was music born of the conviction that the whole creation is groaning in labor pains, lying in waiting, yearning with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.

In most places today in the Christian church there will be one story or another of the presence of the Spirit, and most will, I suppose be centered on the story of the disciples gathered in the house when the mighty winds and the tongues of fire and the speaking of languages broke out. It's a wonderful story, very dramatic, but hard to repeat in everyday life.

It is, I suspect the way in which Dr. Washington, that venerable member of our presbytery is looking for some evidence in all of our lives. But the Spirit of God has never come to me in quite that way, not as tongues of fire or ecstatic experiences. The Spirit I have sensed in my life is of a gentler sort, more like the kind that comes on the bow of the Vedran Smailovic's of life, the ones who themselves give evidence of a power greater than the power of this world.

We live our lives in a world of flesh and blood, of real decisions and everyday worries and practical concerns. A world where getting up and going to work and taking care of the kids and paying the bills and dealing with the boss and making do with less are what we have.

But our confidence as Christians is that this is not all there is, that behind what we see is the love of God, poured out in God's Spirit interceding for us, in our weakness, with sighs too deep for words.

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¹ Leander Keck, **Paul and His Letters**, *Proclamation Series*, 1979. 108.

² The story about Vedran Smailovic which follows is a recounting of Are's words in his his paper for the Moveable Feast for this Sunday, given at the Feast, January 2009, unpublished.