

ONE BIG FAMILY

Genesis 11:1-9
Acts 2:1-21

Faith Community
May 23, 2010

Introduction

Can you imagine what that first Pentecost experience must have been like? The disciples are gathered together in the same room and suddenly they hear a sound like the rushing of a violent wind. Small tongues that look like fire appear resting over each of them. Suddenly the disciples begin to speak in other languages.

At the time there were Jews in Jerusalem from just about every corner of the world. When they heard the noise they went to see what was happening. To their amazement they realized that even though they all spoke different languages, they could all hear what was being said in their native tongue. Many people were amazed. Some thought that they just started hitting the bottle early in the morning.

Pentecost is the celebration of the birth of the Christian church. The church came into existence by the powerful actions of the Holy Spirit.

I

In the first creation story in Genesis it is the Spirit of God that sweeps over the face of the earth transforming the “formless void and darkness” into created order. That spirit of God is the same Holy Spirit that appeared to the disciples and the crowd at Pentecost..

The word for spirit in Hebrew is “ruach” and in Greek it is “pneuma.” Both words can be translated spirit or wind or breath. So when Genesis says that “the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters,” it could also be “the wind from God,” or “the breath of God” swept over the face of the waters. Each word communicates a sometimes subtle, sometimes ferocious power.

Each word expresses a force we can’t see, even though we can clearly see its effect. When a hurricane strikes the coastland we don’t see the wind itself, but we can’t miss the power it has. A force doesn’t have to be visible to be powerful. So the power of God’s spirit is not visible to the eye, but the results of that spirit can be very apparent.

The Holy Spirit of God, which brought order out of chaos in creation and which brought together people of all nations and languages at Pentecost, creates something out of nothing. The power of this Spirit gave us the creation and that same Spirit brought together the people of Christ’s church.

II

As it did on that first Pentecost, the Holy Spirit creates communities of faith. God’s Spirit draws people together to form a worshipping community. We can see from the first Pentecost experience that God’s spirit draws people from all different lands, languages, and ethnic backgrounds.

God pulls together a people who otherwise probably wouldn’t be together and wouldn’t even know each other. I was commenting to someone the other day that I thought the people in the

bell choir probably wouldn't be together for any other reason than to play bells. It's a diverse group with different interests and backgrounds but they all are people of faith and they love to express their faith by playing bells. There are several groups in the church where people who wouldn't typically be together are drawn together to do some kind of ministry.

In the church God's spirit brings us together as a large family. We have different ways of looking at the world, different interests and skills, and we come from different backgrounds. We come together because of faith in God.

Because we aren't all the same, we enrich each others lives. Our differences broaden our outlook; we think about things in a way we never have before. We see perspectives that we never thought of before.

I met with a group from another church that was studying the parables of Jesus. Several people in the group commented that they thought they knew what the parables said before the class began, but as the whole group discussed them, they found insights in the parables they had never thought of. One person said, "I thought I knew what the parable meant, but then Bob kept pointing out parts of the parable I had never noticed before. The class opened up a whole new understanding for me." Because we aren't all the same, we can do that for each other.

III

We also care for each other, support each other, pull together to help. We are brought together to worship God and serve each other. We are all individuals, but we work together for Christ's church. I was thinking that our problems last Sunday morning were a good example of the church at work. The line that held the robe from Kayb's installation broke sometime Saturday night and when we came in Sunday morning it was lying on the floor. When people saw what had happened they pulled together to get it fixed. As people arrived and saw the situation they got out the large sixteen foot ladder and went to work repairing the lines. It was so complicated that even when the service was supposed to start, they were still working on it. No one had to be asked; they just saw the situation and came forward to help.

The church is like that, whether it is supporting someone whose battling cancer, or taking meals to a woman going through a difficult pregnancy, or sending a card to someone you know is having a difficult time, or going to serve at a soup kitchen, or repairing plaster in a Sunday school classroom; we pitch in to help.

IV

The Holy Spirit also opens us to a larger community of faith. Being part of Christ's church, we are drawn to care about God's people wherever they are. We learn to care for people we don't know, as well as the people in our local church. We realize that our local church family is also part of a much larger family that is spread all over the world.

Will Willimon tells of one woman's comment when she was talking about why she joined the church. They were going around the room each telling why they had joined the Methodist church. Some loved the music, others enjoyed the friends they had made, some talked about the fellowship activities. Then this woman said, "Part of me hates the Methodist church. Before I became a Methodist, my life was my life. I was fairly content with myself. Then the church took

me to Haiti and made me stare at people who are dying because of their dire poverty, yet who were also undeniably richer in faith than I would ever be. I could have had a fairly happy life without the church. Now, those strangers in Haiti have become my obsession. I'm thinking about them as if they were *my* family.”

Maybe that's because they are her family. They are part of the bigger family that the Holy Spirit has drawn her into. They are God's children in a different part of the world. The Holy Spirit pulls us outside of ourselves and helps us be aware of our brothers and sisters all over the world.

Conclusion

This church that the Holy Spirit creates is an unusual mixture of people. There are wealthy sophisticates worshipping in cathedrals on Madison Avenue and there are half naked children gathered at a thatch hut in a small village in Africa.

Some churches have a formal ritual where the leader reads from a large book held out in front of him by an aide; some have the intimate format of a rural church where they sing from hymnals that are fifty years old; some have little structure, and the entire worship service is done verbally because not many in the church are able to read.

Some come to church in very formal attire. Some gather in their prison uniforms. Some have almost nothing to wear. Some sing hymns with the slow, solemn cadence of a funeral, while others play electric guitars and pound the rhythm of drums so loudly your eardrums hurt.

In some churches diverse people are able to worship together: the wealthy and the impoverished, the brilliant and those with mental handicaps, the sophisticates and the outcasts, the young, vital and strong side by side with the elderly, weak, and those with physical challenges.

They all belong in this church. They have all been drawn there by the Holy Spirit, and they all are equally valued.

Author Thomas Long is a member of a Presbyterian church in the heart of Atlanta, GA. The church sits right across the street from the state capital building. On Good Friday the legislature adjourned at noon for those who wanted to attend services. Many of the legislators went across the street to the Good Friday service.

In the basement of the church the soup kitchen had just finished serving. The associate pastor invited all of the people who had come for lunch to go upstairs for the church service. Many of them climbed the stairs to go to worship.

In that service those who smelled of expensive cologne shared hymnbooks with those who smelled of clothing that hadn't been washed in weeks. The powerful prayed beside the powerless. The \$800 suit stood next to the clothing from the free clothes closet. They sang hymns and praised God and honored the One who died on the cross for each of them. And they got a glimpse of the diverse church that God has created through Holy Spirit.

Amen