

THE GIFTS OF PENTECOST

The Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday

June 4, 2017

When I was in my twenties and an instructor in English at Northwestern University and not religious at all, something happened to me. I had a Come to Jesus moment that took me entirely by surprise. A colleague in the English Department was interested in the poet T.S. Eliot's writings on Christianity. I read them and was drawn to his severely intellectual approach—probably more drawn than I should have been. Then we also found ourselves talking about Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*. I read his famous and influential book of letters and reflections on God in the twentieth century, which was written just before his 1945 execution by the Nazi regime for being part of the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler.

I can't really say how it happened, but I was deeply moved and drawn to Jesus and to the way of thought and life of those who follow him. When the disciples on the road to Emmaus recognize the risen Jesus, they say, "Were not our hearts burning within us?" That was how I felt. But why? Out of my own fear and lack of self-knowledge, I decided that it must be a passing intellectual enthusiasm and tamped it down and ignored it until it subsided.

In fact, I was deeply unsettled by the strong feelings that came from I knew not where. I was bent on being a writer and teacher; that what I felt might be a call to vocation never occurred to me, and I kept my feelings to

myself. Thanks to my own fear and willfulness, it took me nearly thirty years to hear that call again.

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink,” Jesus says in this morning’s Pentecost gospel. What happens when you begin to quench that thirst? An astonishing abundance: “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.” This is the great counterintuitive truth of the Christian faith: its greatest rewards lie not in what you get, but in what you give.

The Day of Pentecost is the third great celebration of God’s unfolding presence in the world, after Easter and Christmas. The church has a word for what comes to us: it is the *inbreaking* of the Holy Spirit. It’s an attempt to find a word for something that happens inside us—a holy invasion of our hearts and souls.

It is the human condition to thirst, both literally and figuratively. We can live only about three days without water, but we can thirst for a very long time for what the Holy Spirit give us, as I know all too well.

What are we thirsty for? For engagement and commitment and rest, not drudgery or fear, or a by-the-numbers slogging through the business of life. We thirst for fruitful collaboration and creative life in a community, where who we are what we have to give is valued, and where we value the contributions of others.

We thirst for Sabbath, for rest, for the moment of leisure and awareness to give thanks for the blessings of this life. Above all, we thirst for a new, redeemed life, as the answer to the aching fear of living without meaning. And often fear and anxiety lead to self-defeating resentment or anger.

This new life is the promise of baptism, the holy sacrament to be received by young Gerard deBlasi this morning. Baptism is living water. We will hear in the words of the baptismal ceremony the promise that through the water of baptism we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.

In spite of all these descriptions of what Spirit does, and all our professions of the power of God the Holy Spirit, it remains a mystery. Of course we turn to metaphors. The Spirit is water; and, also in gospel of John, the Spirit is wind: “You hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” So, it is precious and essential and life-giving as water, and as mysterious as the wind.

It is our thirst that opens us to the Spirit. Simone Weil, the French mystic and thinker, wrote: “Grace fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it.” Thirst or void, God yearns to answer our need.

Even though we may not always be aware of it, the Spirit is a holy presence, always present in us and in the world. This is God’s truth about our potential for abundant life, and I would say it is also a truth about the

inseparable connections between our minds and hearts and God's presence in the world. If we are miserable, or angry or alienated (all ways of being "thirsty") then the world that we walk around in each day is parched and lifeless. We're like the stock cartoon character in the desert, hoping for an oasis or a water hole but reaching out desperately toward that mirage shimmering just ahead—if only he could reach it, everything would be fine: a new relationship, a new job, a new city (what's been called the geographical cure for whatever problems we have).

Real sustenance, real food and drink come to us in the present, now, this moment, in all that's around us. We do have to make the choice to see the Spirit and act on what we see and know. We're not afraid, we're not alone: we rest in God's everlasting arms. That is what we celebrate on Pentecost, and that is what we acknowledge and celebrate with baptism.

If won't hurt to say this twice this morning: Let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.

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