

Pentecost Sermon – May 27, 2007
Acts 2:1-11, John 14:8-17
Susan Flanders

Once again, from John's Gospel, we have a convoluted reading about how Jesus and God are one. Jesus is in God; God is in him, and the works that Jesus does are God's work – and somehow, all of this will be in us too, because of this Spirit which will be sent to us.

And then we have the usual Pentecost reading that we hear every year from the Book of Acts – the vivid story about how this same Spirit allowed Jesus' followers to communicate with all the diverse strangers gathered around in Jerusalem one day. Along with rushing wind and tongues of flame, all heard the disciples' testimony in their own languages – sort of like simultaneous translation at the United Nations!

Convoluted theological language and a miracle story – how does the Bible help us here to understand more about God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit? What message is here on this Pentecost (so named because it's the 50th day after Easter)? Tradition has it that the church was born on this day when the power of the Holy Spirit invaded to community of disciples and inspired them to tell their story – and they have, ever since. It's a rich story, compelling, odd, demanding serious attention. The Christian story invites both faith and doubt, and probably both are needed for anyone to become confirmed and mature in this faith.

I'm going to tell you about my own struggle between what feel like two very different kinds of Christian faith – one quite orthodox, one quite agnostic – one centered on Jesus, one centered on Holy Spirit.

As a Christian, I might place myself in the long tradition of folks, going all the way back to the disciples, who feel that in Jesus we meet all the fullness of God's love. Indeed one of the great strengths of Christianity is that in Jesus we have a unique way of connecting with God – a person who actually lived in history – a real embodiment in the same humanity we have – not some vague, abstract, indefinable otherness. In Jesus, we see God.

This has been superbly expressed by John Snow (retired professor of pastoral theology at EDS in Cambridge) – and if you've been coming here awhile, you may have heard me read it before. Here is Snow:

“When, at the baptism of Jesus, God spoke and said, ‘This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased’, [it is as if God were saying to us] ‘if you want to know who I am, if you want to know what reality is, if you want to understand what I have created and why, and why I have created you, look very closely at the piece of

history this baptism begins. This is the most complete answer you are ever going to get to these questions.'

'Look closely at this Jewish peasant standing in this dirty little creek. Keep your eyes on this man, listen to what he says. Watch how he deals with the people around him and the creation within which he moves. See how he addresses the sick the crippled, the blind and the deaf. See how he relates to outcast and sinners. Listen to what he has to say to his enemies, to his persecutors, to the religious and secular authorities. See how he uses his time; what is important to him and unimportant to him...See how he loves and cares about children. Pay attention to how he treats women and how quickly they understand who he is.'

'Consider his attitudes towards the use of force and violence. Notice his courage when he is afraid. Notice that there are things that make him angry, and pay attention to what they are. Notice how at home he is in the world, how he acts as if he has a right to be here, how he enjoys being here.'

'Appreciate his generosity of spirit, his hospitality, how he likes to feed and welcome anyone who comes along. Pay attention to how he dies, how his fear of pain and death do not stop his expressions of love and concern for his friends and family. How alert he is to the pain of his neighbor in his own pain. How he meets death itself as a completion and perfection of his life, and not as bad luck or a dirty trick.'

'But above all, continue to pay attention when he dies. Watch as he is taken down from the cross and washed and wrapped in grave cloths by the women and put in his tomb, and notice a bit later that the tomb is empty. And notice how much this person, [Jesus]my beloved child, is like you.'"

To me, these words offer a way of understanding how Jesus and God really are one. It's not like Jesus is some small earthly vessel in which to contain God - Jesus is the presence of God, the Word of God, and it is through Jesus, his life and death and resurrection that Christians come to know God. I think of Jesus as a sort of gateway into the realm of the holy. It's this understanding of Jesus that John is trying to develop in his gospel with all his language about God being in Jesus and Jesus being in the Father and how Jesus' works are the signs of God in the world.

Confusing - then and now. How can a human being show us God? Or maybe, just maybe, our humanity really is God's fullest expression of God's self - God in all of us, and Jesus is the everlasting sign of that. I do believe this; I do believe in Jesus in this way.

But there's also enough of me that is agnostic, meaning literally, not knowing, that the sort of scandalous particularity and concreteness of Jesus - a Jewish man

who lived in Nazareth a long time ago – makes it hard for me to experience him as God. I can surely learn from Jesus, try to follow Jesus, try to understand his teachings, but I really do also need Spirit – some sense that comes from within but that also seems to be God. I need Pentecost, along with Easter.

I recently came across a passage by the philosopher William James, a noted agnostic. For me, at times of wonder and doubt, and not being sure that Jesus was the full revelation of God, these words of James are both provocative and eloquent:

“For my own part, I do not know what the sweat and blood and tragedy of this life mean...If this life be not a real flight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it feels like a real flight – as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem; and first of all to redeem our own hearts from atheism and fears. For such a half-wild, half-saved universe our nature is adapted. The deepest thing in our nature is this dumb region of the heart in which we dwell along with our willingness and unwillingness, our faiths and fears...Here is our deepest organ of communication with the nature of things; and compared with these concrete movements of our soul all abstract statements and scientific arguments, (all those scholarly vetoes) pronounced upon our faith – sound to us like mere chatterings of the teeth.”

Although I don't totally make sense of him – James' writing is very dense, I find in this passage an evocation of Spirit that is within us, that reaches into the world, reaches for God, even as it arises from God deep within us.

To me, this is Pentecost. Underneath the fantastic story of the speaking in tongues, is a story about a community discovering that once both the earthly Jesus and the risen Christ were gone, there was still with them and in them a power and presence they felt to be God. From it they drew power to communicate, to talk about their faith, and, most important, to live it. The story of Jesus is met by the story of the Holy Spirit.

I need both stories to help me make sense of my own story. I meet Jesus and his stories again and again speaking to me in so many seasons of my life. Because of Jesus, I am a Christian. I also need the assurance of Spirit deep in our human hearts and deep in the whole creation, and in that, I believe I share something with all people of faith, Christian or not. In John's Gospel, it is Jesus who promises that this Spirit will come to us – that there is a connection between God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It is this connection that gives rise to our celebration today and, as we are dismissed in a whole array of tongues, we are to go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit. Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.