

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
May 16, 2010

Conspiracy
John 20:10-23; Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost Sunday is next week, but I wanted to share with you my reflections on Pentecost since Rev. Kim of the Korean Glory PC will be preaching next Sunday.

I hope you'll forgive me for getting a week ahead of myself here. It's just that Pentecost is one of my very favorite days of the church year. And while it makes perfect sense for you to hear the gospel preached in a foreign language next week, with Pastor Kim as our preacher - what a treat that will be for Pentecost Sunday itself ... I couldn't resist having my yearly turn with this favorite text ...

David Leininger tells a story of a time when he was out shopping with his wife. They visited several different stores. It was amazing. In NONE of them was there any indication that there were only several more shopping days till Pentecost! The closest any came was the nursery department at Home Depot where there were PENTAS on sale - bushy, rounded evergreen shrubs with hairy, bright-green leaves and dense

clusters of many small, star-shaped, tubular flowers in shades of red, pink, purple or white. So of course, being a pastor, he asked the sales clerk, “How much does a PENTA COST?” That is as close as they made it to any commercialization of the holiday.

In a way, that might be considered surprising. Pentecost was not originally a Christian observance - ancient Jews celebrated the day as a spring harvest festival, the 50th day after Passover. Later, Pentecost came to be the time to remember the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, but from Canaanite days, this season of the year was the time to celebrate the spring harvest. The festival was one considered so important that all Jewish men within traveling distance were supposed to worship in Jerusalem at the temple. And they WANTED to - it was like a Christian celebrating Christmas in Bethlehem. And, yes, it was PARTY TIME! (David Leininger, in a sermon, “Visions and dreams”, May 18, 1997.) It’s in this context that Acts 2 takes place [READ ACTS 2:1-21]

Did you know that the word “conspire” means to breathe together? On the count of 3, let’s all take a breath (1...2...3). Now blow it out again. There! We’ve just launched a conspiracy. You can hear the word “spirit” in there too – to conspire – to be filled with the same spirit, the

same wind. What happens when we come together to worship God is that the Holy Spirit swoops down among us and offers us the choice of joining in God's conspiracy to share his love and grace with the world.

Now take another breath. Isn't it fascinating to think that beneath our atmosphere is all the air that ever was? The same ancient air just keeps recirculating, which means that every time any of us breathes we breathe air left over from the creation of the earth. We literally breathe dinosaur breath. We breathe the same air that Plato breathed, and Mozart and Michelangelo. "Every time we breathe, we take in what was once some baby's first breath, or some dying person's last." (Barbara Brown Taylor).

Barbara Brown Taylor very imaginatively describes the last moments of Jesus: "When Jesus let go of his last breath – willingly, we believe, for love of us – that breath hovered in the air in front of him for a moment and then it was set loose on earth. It was such pungent breath – so full of passion, so full of life – that it did not simply dissipate as so many breaths do. It grew, in strength and in volume, until it was a mighty wind, which God sent spinning through an upper room in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. God wanted to make sure that Jesus' friends were the inheritors of Jesus' breath, and it worked.

Before the day was over, the church had grown from one hundred twenty to more than three thousand. Shy people had become bold, scared people had become gutsy, and lost people had found a sure sense of direction. Disciples who had not believed themselves capable of tying their own sandals without Jesus discovered abilities within themselves they never knew they had. When they opened their mouths to speak, they sounded like Jesus. When they laid their hands upon the sick, it was as if Jesus himself had touched them. In short order, they were doing things they had never seen anyone but him do, and there was no explanation for it, except that they had dared to inhale on the day of Pentecost. They had sucked in God's own breath and they had been transformed by it. The Holy Spirit had entered into them the same way it had entered into Mary, the mother of Jesus, and for the same reason. It was time for God to be born again – not in one body this time but in a body of believers who would receive the breath of life from their Lord and pass it on, using their own bodies to distribute the gift.” (Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, 143-144).

The question for us to consider this morning is: do we still believe in a God who acts like that? Do we still believe in a God who blows through closed doors and sets our heads on fire? Do we still believe in a

God with power to transform us, both as individuals and as a people, or have we come to an unspoken agreement that our God is pretty old and tired by now, someone to whom we may address our prayer requests but not anyone we really expect to change our lives?

I heard Clifton Kirkpatrick, formerly the Stated Clerk of our Presbyterian Church, once tell a story of a young African student who was studying in Atlanta. He loved the experience of studying in our country and of experiencing our culture, but there was one thing that mystified him: decaffeinated coffee. They didn't have decaffeinated coffee in his country, and he couldn't grasp the concept. It looked like the real thing, smelled like the real thing, even tasted like the real thing, but it lacked the punch of the real thing.

Without the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we're in danger of becoming decaffeinated Christians. As Tom Tewell notes, "Do we take seriously the radical nature of the gospel?" We don't want a watered down version of the gospel. We don't want decaffeinated Christianity.

Decaffeinated Christianity is Christianity that's guaranteed to not keep you awake at night. "Decaffeinated Christianity is a Christianity without concern for the poor... Decaffeinated Christianity is a Christianity without a concern for those in bondage, who are in captivity,

who are oppressed... Decaffeinated Christianity is a Christianity without a concern for evangelism, without a concern for spreading the good news of the saving power of Jesus Christ to the whole world... Decaffeinated Christianity is a Christianity without a concern for justice, mercy, and compassion... Decaffeinated Christianity is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would call cheap grace, because it's 'grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.'

Decaffeinated Christianity is a Christianity that's missing the power and punch of the Holy Spirit.

On Pentecost, the people thought the disciples were drunk with the spirit – that's the opposite of Decaffeinated Christianity.

Now please understand: I'm not saying that every time we receive the Holy Spirit the result will be overwhelming, divine power. There's not going to be fireworks all the time. Sam Hamilton-Poore points out that, when it comes to the Holy Spirit, another version of Pentecost can be found in John's Gospel, Chapter 20. The Risen Jesus appears to his disciples and, after blessing them with his peace, breathes upon them.

The Greek word for "breath" is *pneuma*, also translated as "spirit". Hamilton-Poore says that "Jesus in-spirits/inspires them with his own breath/spirit/Spirit-then he authorizes them for the mission of forgiving

sins...Closer to us than our own breath and breathing, the Risen Christ fills us with his own Spirit – [often] quietly, intimately. With this breath, this power, we then go about the everyday, unspectacular, grubby work (and it is work) of forgiveness. Breathe, forgive; breathe, forgive; breathe, forgive.”

I find it helpful to read both the accounts of Pentecost found in John and Acts. Sometimes we experience the dazzling or spectacular; but other times we encounter the Holy Spirit through the quiet power and grace of our regular lives.

The good news is that the Holy Spirit still acts in our lives. Whether it’s giving us a second wind, or enabling us to speak “with eloquence you know you do not have, or offering forgiveness you had not meant to offer” (Taylor), the Spirit is alive and kicking. Do we still believe in a God who acts like that? More importantly, do we still experience a God who acts like that? I certainly hope so.

Let’s join “the Gospel of the Holy Spirit Conspiracy and see what happens next.” (Taylor, 148). Breathe on us, Holy Spirit. Breathe on us breath of God. Amen.