

## *Silver Linings*

Pentecost Sunday, June 12, 2011

Acts 2: 1-21

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*“Though humans crucify, God resurrects. Though humans divide and dominate, God communicates. God has the last word, and the word is wild. It changes everything. It rebuilds broken community. It breaks boundaries and enlarges the house. It makes possible understanding where before there was not understanding.”*

*“We are a Movement For Wholeness in a Fragmented World.” ~ Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins, General Minister and President, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*

Experience has taught me that hidden within most challenging experiences in life is the possibility of a silver lining...like a metaphorical pinion (you know...those soft feathers) that line the rigid and impenetrable length of a mother eagle's wing span. Faith has taught me that hidden within the most desperate or seemingly unchangeable realities of life is the grace of hope. As Emily Dickenson writes:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -

Often you have to look hard for it, this silver lining. And sometimes it reveals itself in ways truly incomprehensible – like manna in a desert, and a healing everyone else has given up hope. But my years of ministry with faithful people like you have proven that stitched delicately underneath the most hardened or hopeless situations is an effusive, sometimes even glittering pathway that can lead you home. You may have to face the lions and tigers and bears, but with perseverance, the blessing *always* will come.

I came home from church last night and made a phone call that I had saved for a quiet time alone. It was to a member of our church whose husband had been hospitalized all last week with severe COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease). COPD makes it very difficult to breathe, but on Wednesday, after a full week in the hospital, he was looking to come home by tomorrow. Yet yesterday, I discovered he had been moved to a nursing home. The phone message said, in a sorrowful reversal of fortune that he had been given just 3-6 more months to live. As I spoke with Georgia and felt the agony in her voice, I had to close my eyes once again and let go of my natural inclination to find the right words. *How to we speak hope to what feels like hopelessness without making it sound doctrinaire or trite or far too simple? What language do we use when our situations cannot speak to the same experience or understanding?*

Over here is Georgia in her sorrow, contemplating years of life with her husband and overwhelmed by the realities ahead of her. Over here is her minister on the other end of the phone trying to activate every power of faith without assumption or what might even sound like

an answer, or a hollow word. In the silence and the snuffles we both came to the edges of something comforting ~ based on years of her lived faith. Hope. Hope in the unseen. Hope in the possibility of miracles. Hope in the God whose very Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for the saints according to the grace of faith. “I cannot think about tomorrow” she said. “I have to take it one day at a time.” More silence. Then she said something truly miraculous. “Maybe God’s miracle will come in a way I may not like. But it will come, I know it.”

Today we celebrate Pentecost ~ that day when the Disciples, gathered together in Jerusalem as the risen Jesus had instructed them. They were awaiting the Holy Spirit, though they didn’t know what to expect or how it might look. They were looking into an unknown future, but with faith in the One who sent them there. They were expecting the end of the world as they knew it, and for a new world to be inaugurated. What they got was an experience... of sights and sounds that would have frightened anyone else. Loud winds, like tornados. Flashes of fire, like lightening. And these physical sensations touched them...but instead of terror they experienced unity, even a kind of ecstasy. One that was unintelligible and somewhat overpowering. They leapt to their feet and words came out of their mouths that made no sense to those speaking but every bit of sense to those rushing to witness such an unexpected event. I suppose to the onlookers it was as if their speech was slurring a bit – which is what happens when people are inebriated. Or suffer a stroke. The words don’t come out as planned. Some part of the brain is bypassed.

Reality was that they were bowled over by something so powerful and unexpected that it literally made them come across as inebriated... drunk, happy and unselfconscious. I can see them dancing and laughing and not being worried about what everyone else was thinking. What a great thought.

But the disciples’ drunkenness is not a drunkenness of escape or denial but a euphoria of hope. What comes to them as *divided* tongues actually *draws together* people who have been previously scattered in diaspora ~ cultures and traditions, tribes and languages suddenly finding a mutual understanding. The miracle of Pentecost happens as they both speak and hear about God’s powerful deeds. God rushes in with wind and flame to fill the entire house, but then bursts those house bounds by touching the crowds with the power of understanding.

And this is the point, I think. Misunderstanding is one of the greatest challenges of all times. When we don’t understand each other, don’t “get” each other...when we cannot enter into the experience and the life experiences of the other that has shaped and formed opinions and actions, behaviors and personalities, we will have real trouble getting along, listening, finding common ground, even loving. In order to traverse the boundaries that our natural proclivities towards fear, competition and misunderstand erect, we need the Holy Spirit – who comes as power, as advocate and counselor, as guide, as guardian. And it doesn’t just *happen*, even as it might seem to. We must *trust* in that which is promised but which we cannot yet see.

The Bible speaks with many voices about the role of the Holy Spirit ~ and to which I will be visiting over these next number of Sunday’s. This passage from Acts, however, gives us a beginning point: “*the Holy Spirit is poured out by God to empower the church to advance*

*Christ's mission to the very ends of the earth.*" (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3 p. 16*). **The Holy Spirit is mission oriented**, providing "the miracles of healing, economic sharing, and community. The Spirit gives the apostles courage in the face of threats, guidance in major decisions... and reshapes the character and temperament of cooperating believers" (*Ibid, p. 16*). The falling of the Spirit upon believing Gentiles confirms for Peter and other early church leaders the mission of the Gospel beyond the bounds of traditional Judaism.

Pentecost is then perhaps about the reversal of the Tower of Babel, told in Genesis 11: 1-9. According to this story, the people of the earth once spoke a common language but were then scattered into different linguistic groups because of their prideful attempt to build a tower with its top reaching up into the heavens. The English word "babble" comes from the name "Babel." Babel is the story of the fragmentation of humankind into separate and often hostile groups who do not understand each other.

Thus, for the author of Luke-Acts, the coming of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit inaugurated a new age in which the fragmentation of humanity was overcome. Or, in words attributed to Paul, the breaking down of "the dividing wall of separation" and the creation of "one new humanity." (Ephesians 2:14-15).

Here... at this Table where we will in a moment gather, is one place where the vital hope of a new future, a new creation, and a new humanity is strikingly, if not mysteriously, actualized. Jesus, knowing that his future would include a "suffering unto death" was able to proclaim with faith and forgiveness that the blessings of those who would follow him would surely come. Even through a death like his would His Kingdom Come. These are the words, and the faith we must return to when the news is bad, or the future looks so bleak. As Georgia, so deeply embraced, "the miracle may not look like what I want it to look like, but it will surely come." May we all feed upon her faith. Amen.