

Diversity, Listening, and Breath

May 19, 2024

In Case the Holy Spirit Doesn't Show Up

If you've been worshipping with us for a while, you've probably heard me joke with the phrase, "One of my colleagues always says that the only reason she prints a bulletin is in case the Holy Spirit doesn't show up."

I usually pull out that quip when I forget to follow the pattern of worship that we printed and it has thrown you all, and especially the others who are responsible for other elements of worship, for a loop. The colleague who says that is the Rev. Wanda Washington, an African American woman, who spent much of her ministry at Trinity UCC in Chicago, the second largest UCC in the country. They have several thousand people who worship with them each Sunday, phenomenal preaching, hundreds of people in their choir.

Let me tell you, the Holy Spirit has never forgotten to show up at Trinity. And, while "in case the Holy Spirit doesn't show up" is a churchy way of saying, "My bad," I fear that in saying that, I may have been perpetuating a notion that the Holy Spirit is some sort of magic worker, that the Holy Spirit is Obi-Wan Kenobi waving his hand and saying, "This is not the order of worship you were looking for."

In that, I've done you a disservice, because the coming of the Holy Spirit, which we celebrate today, 50 days after Easter, is much less magic wand, and much more diversity, listening, and breath. Wanda Washington would still be proud of me, as I just laid out another of her principles of worship – all you need are three points and a hymn.

(In case you missed my hint at the three points, they're diversity, listening, and breath. Now, back to the Holy Spirit.)

Too often, churches portray the Holy Spirit as a magician. Nathan Monk tells this story from his childhood growing up Pentecostal:

When I was a teenager, my mom drove us down from Nashville to Pensacola to visit my grandmother, but there was a special event she was excited to take us to: the Brownsville Revival. We arrived at the massive church to join the line, hoping to make it into the main sanctuary and not the overflow tent with the projector screens.

After finally being ushered in, we took our seats. I was full of faith and hope that maybe, just maybe, God might meet us here and all our troubles would go away. Could God give us a house or my dad a good job? Just about anything would have bolstered my belief; I wasn't greedy or being specific.

Toward the end of the service, different ministers walked around laying hands on folks. Almost instantly, upon being touched, people would fall over with laughter and smiles, presumably being filled with the Holy Spirit. I wanted to be happy; maybe the minister would touch my forehead and give me some of this joy. As he approached me, I felt his clammy hand on my forehead, and I just waited for the happiness to flow through me.

It didn't. Nothing happened. I wasn't falling over.

Slowly, I could feel him giving me just a little push. Not enough to knock me over unwillingly but just enough to encourage me to. Now, the minister and I were locked in a battle of wills. He needed me to fall, and I needed him not to be full of (garbage, although Monk doesn't use the word garbage). Eventually, he won, and I lay there on the ground, not smiling, not filled with joy.

“Well, forget this.” I thought (except here again, Monk doesn't use the word “forget”). That was the day doubt finally crept into my soul.

It's no wonder that doubt crept into our author, Nathan Monk's, young teenage soul, as charlatans dressed as preachers gently nudged whole tents full of believers to the ground, no one except a yearning teenager willing to expose the lie. And it's not only the Pentecostals that get it wrong. Our church may not have tent revivals and nudge people into publicly pretending to be in spiritual ecstasy, but we have used Pentecost and the Great Commission – you know, the passage in which Jesus says, “Go make disciples of all nations” – to justify the Doctrine of Discovery and colonization and the centuries of domination and bloodshed, all in the name of God.

From Nathan Monk again:

Every branch of the Church has evangelized at some point in history. They got into a boat, went somewhere they had no business going, and tried to convert the people to believe in their brand of Jesus, a Jesus who became increasingly pale and bland and flavorless with each spice we stole and land we conquered and people we enslaved in the name of this divine God. We demanded assimilation to our culture, our God, and our language.

Friends, the Great Commission isn't given to us to conquer other lands and dominate them, and the gift of the Holy Spirit isn't given to us to pretend that we feel some sort of magic. Our passage from the Acts of the Apostles today tells us that the point of receiving the Holy Spirit is that Jesus' disciples understood and were able to be understood by people of every land and culture.

Pentecost and the Great Commission were not for us to go out and conquer lands and obliterate their cultures; we were supposed to speak their language. We were supposed to take the gift of understanding each other as a way to bring peace on earth.

(Monk)

At the end of the day, the gift of the Holy Spirit, isn't some giddy zap of energy that courses through our veins, it's God saying:

“You've understood me as being ‘out here’ (gestures to the sky),
you've understood me as being ‘here’ (gestures trying to indicate a person),
now I'd like you to understand my divine presence as being in here, too (gestures to self).”

That has profound implications. The wisdom, understanding, right judgment, courage, knowledge, reverence, and wonder and awe in God's presence that we are used to looking to Jesus and the Father to provide are now being invested in us. And, it's up to us to use those gifts to do God's work in the world, in all of its diversity.

Listening

If our first lesson from Pentecost is that diversity is to be appreciated, not obliterated, that dovetails perfectly with our second lesson, listening. To illustrate that, I lean on another colleague I quote often, retired pastor the poet Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes:

At Pentecost we're pretty sure
we did the miraculous talking,
"speaking in tongues."
But what if, in fact, the miracle was that
those people from every nation
heard in tongues?
What if they had the God-given gift
to listen deeply enough to know
the work of God when they heard it,
even in a foreign language?

Isn't that how Jesus listened?

We think we have so much to say.
Maybe we have something to hear.
Maybe the true Pentecost gift
isn't speaking at all, but listening:
listening in tongues,
letting the Spirit listen through us,
listening in new ways
for what we haven't heard,
listening deeply enough to hear God,
even in the life of someone not like us.

What miracles emerge, when we listen deeply!

This point, that Pentecost should inspire us to listen, is one more way that God's ways will flourish through us. Again, not by obliterating the differences between us, not by dominating those who are other, but by understanding who the other is.

As Garnaas-Holmes' poem notes, this is how Jesus listened, and in Pentecost, this listening is now how we are to carry on his work. I have to wonder how would Nathan Monk's faith, indeed his life, have been different, if instead of trying to get him to pretend that he'd been overcome by the Holy Spirit, the preacher had instead spent actual time listening to him, hearing that the deepest longings of his heart were for a roof over his head and a job for his dad? Might the network of the church been activated to help his dad find work? Find a landlord willing to forego a security deposit?

Friends, I'd like to suggest to you today, that through true, careful listening, the Holy Spirit works through us, not so that we can speak gibberish, but rather to let the divine work through us. Whenever you truly listen to someone and it brings about healing and wholeness, that's the Holy Spirit working through you.

Breath

And that brings us to our third point, breath. In our Old Testament reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, we're given the image of breath reanimating dry bones, breath bringing something that was dry and barren back to life.

As I was praying over the past few weeks with our two scripture readings for today, trying to figure out how they intersect, the restorative power of breath kept coming to the forefront. You may not realize that the centering prayer that we often do with our kids at the beginning of the Children's Sermon, breathing in then saying "Holy Spirit," and breathing out then saying "bring us peace," is rooted in the idea that one of the symbols of the Holy Spirit is wind, or more specifically, air.

In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles today, we're told that the Holy Spirit manifested itself as a driving wind, but in the Gospel of John, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit onto his followers. Whether the Holy Spirit manifests as the winds of change or the breath of life, it is as critical to life as is air.

We've all heard that when we're struggling, when things are difficult, we're to take a deep breath. What you may not realize is that science now tells us that if that deep breath in is through our nostrils, not through our mouths, it has the power to build empathy.

In a recent study done by scientists at Northwestern University:

Subjects were presented with fearful or surprised faces, and had to make rapid decisions on the emotional expressions of the faces they saw. It turns out that they were able to recognize the emotions much faster when the faces appeared specifically during an in-breath through the nose. This didn't happen during an out-breath, nor with mouth breathing.

(Crystal Goh)

Where that takes my brain is that the intersection of our three themes today – diversity, listening, and breath – is that slowing down and breathing through our noses not only draws in the manifestation of God we call the Holy Spirit, it in turn facilitates more attentive listening, which we then are to harness for the building up of God's ways in all of the diverse situations in which we find ourselves.

Homework

PWHEW! That was a lot, so I'll be brief with your homework assignment today. Remember I named the Doctrine of Discovery and colonialization as some misguided manifestations of the Great Commission earlier, that dominating and subduing other cultures was a horribly misguided attempt to spread the Gospel? That may be all fine and good, but it's still pretty cerebral, pretty heady.

In our day to day lives, one of the ways that those tragically misguided behaviors still have their tentacles around us is in the tribalism we're encountering today. More and more, we insulate ourselves with only people who think like we do. I'm guilty of it. I don't go to the family gatherings of extended family where I know they're going to be spewing the politics I find not only distasteful but immoral.

Pentecost should have me rethinking that behavior. Instead of subduing other cultures and squashing diversity, living Pentecost means "deliberately and relentlessly being in authentic relationships with people who are different from us. Rather than trying to convince them or persuade them to agree with us, we would do well to listen to them, look them in the eyes, and value them as a part of the same Body of Christ we are.

Our homework is to "deliberately and relentlessly be in authentic relationships with people who are different from us." It's going to take a lot of listening, and breathing in through our noses will help us access the gifts of the Holy Spirit. When we do, the ways of God will manifest through us, not as domination and control, but as love beyond our wildest imagination. Then, we will know the ecstasy of the Holy Spirit coursing through our veins. Then, we will know what it is to not just be in love, not just love something or someone, but to be love. May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen!

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