

Sunday, 15 May 2016

Pentecost- the work of the Spirit- overcoming division



Acts 2:1-21

The preacher John Stott said, “As a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead”. The Spirit is the life of the church. The goal of the Christian life is to love and serve God and through this we enter a shared life with God. God becomes an everyday reality for us and there is a mysterious peace and joy that exists and grows as our life becomes unified with Christ. The Spirit’s desire is to develop this process in each of us and to have this process spread to as many people as possible.

The Spirit seems to be very concerned with joining people. St. Augustine described the Holy Spirit as the love that exists between God the Father and God the Son. From all eternity God the Holy Spirit exists as the unity and love between two persons, and that is what He continues to do. We could say the Spirit exists as the love between you and God. When you are minding

your own business and your heart starts to burn within you and you have an overwhelming desire to pray, that is the Holy Spirit present in you joining you in love to God. This warmth might build in you when you sing a hymn, or it might happen while you are already praying, or when you look at the sunset, and a profound gratitude builds up in you and tears fill your eyes. That is the Holy Spirit joining you to God.

After his Ascension, Jesus is present to us through the Holy Spirit, and he is at work making us the body of Christ. So just as we are joined to God by the Holy Spirit, so we are also drawn into a mysterious unity with one another by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit exists as the love between us. You may have had the overwhelming desire to call someone and then find out that they really needed someone to talk to. Or just being together on Sunday you feel a connection that goes beyond mere sociology. It goes beyond friendship. You feel a connection that runs deeper.

The Holy Spirit is a master of overcoming barriers with love. You might feel a pressure inside yourself to forgive someone who has wronged you, or to say “sorry” when you have wronged someone else. The Holy Spirit wants to destroy divisions and draw us into unity. If we look at the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 we see that most of them are about our relationship with another person- “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”.

We often think of the Holy Spirit in terms of miraculous powers. We might think of healing miracles, or we might think of some of the other amazing stories our Charismatic friends tell us. The Holy Spirit will use these miraculous means if it means drawing

people closer to God and closer to each other. Usually what is needed is not a miracle. Rather, what is often needed is the grace to be patient, and kind, when we would really rather not be. If that is what will help us grow in love then that is what the Holy Spirit will empower us to do.

This also means the Holy Spirit is active outside these church walls. The Holy Spirit is active in our neighborhoods and where we work. The Holy Spirit wants to draw everyone into deeper relationship with God and with other people. So wherever barriers are being broken between people, and people are being brought closer together in love, you will find the Holy Spirit there. When you find division and bitterness you will likely see the absence of the Holy Spirit, or a resistance to the work of the Holy Spirit.

When we look at the famous reading from the Book of Acts we see the Holy Spirit bridging those gaps. We read that after Jesus was crucified and then resurrected on Easter day he also ascended into Heaven. After that God poured out his Spirit on the Disciples of Jesus. The Bible speaks about this event using images of fire and wind, which make us think about God blowing life into the first human being in Genesis, and the fire of God descending on Mt. Sinai when Moses received the Law in Exodus. The Disciples had the life of the Spirit blown into them, and the law of love was burned into their hearts. They were reborn and they became the Body of Christ- The power of Christ would become active in and through them. Any barrier that was left between them and Christ was knocked down by the Holy Spirit. They were hiding behind closed doors, full of fear, and then they are filled with the boldness of Christ who was now

working in them.

At Pentecost the disciples of Jesus all received the same Spirit. Any division between the disciples was being knocked down by the Holy Spirit. They were made one by sharing in the one Spirit- they were unified in a new way.

The Holy Spirit then began work knocking down the barrier that stood between them and those who did not know Jesus. When the Spirit filled them they started miraculously speaking in other languages they didn't know. They weren't just random languages; they were the languages of those who were within earshot who were visiting from all over the known world. They were people who weren't present to hear about Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. They came from all over- from Rome, and Northern Africa, and from near the Caspian Sea, and Turkey. Suddenly, the language barrier was gone. The tower of Babel was reversed and language was miraculously not a barrier. Through the disciples they hear about Jesus.

They hear it from Galileans even- uncivilized country bumpkins, not academics who might actually know the languages. It didn't come from the Temple. It came from nobodies. The barrier between the somebodies and the nobodies was smashed.

The Spirit loves to bring people together. You can fight it. The Spirit won't override your free will, but the Spirit's desire is to create a community full of peace, love, healing, and understanding. The Spirit wants to create a community where people learn to be like Jesus.

And so the disciples are brought into greater unity by sharing

this one Spirit. Those who are listening to them miraculously speaking different languages are unified in understanding what is being said. The act of the Spirit working through the disciples transcends nationalities and languages. It didn't matter what people they belonged to, or what language they spoke. They heard and were drawn into the community. The confusion of nationalities and languages symbolized by the Tower of Babel story is reversed.

And then Peter speaks to the crowd that has gathered to describe what they are witnessing and he points to a prophecy of Joel where God says, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy[eye], your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days and they will prophesy." (Joel 2:28-32). It's not just nationality and language that is removed as a barrier to community, but the age barrier is removed- Both old and young are unified in the Spirit. The gender barrier is removed- both women and men are unified in the Spirit. I will pour out my Spirit on all people, God says. The Spirit transcends the barriers that divide us as human beings.

This is work the Spirit is still interested in. In your life the Spirit wants to destroy any barrier that stands between you and God. The Spirit wants to destroy the barrier that stands between you and your fellow Christian- whether that be a Christian in your church, or other denominations. We are brothers and sisters because we share in the one Spirit. The Spirit also wants to remove the barrier that stands between us and those who do not know Christ. The Spirit wants to draw them and make them

fellow brothers and sisters to us, and the Spirit wants to use us to do that. The Spirit wants to use us to help remove the barrier that stands between people and God. That same Spirit that was in Peter and the disciples on Pentecost is in you. We are called to be a community that tears down barriers that divide people.

At Pentecost the world became less divided, it went from being a world divided by nationalities, languages, wealth, age, and gender, to a world divided only by a person's will to be included or excluded in the family of God. And God's will is for us to be one, healed, and at peace. That is the desire and work of the Spirit- To work in the world, even through us, to bring wholeness where there is division. AMEN