

Wesley United Methodist Church

May 15, 2016

"...from the Inside Out."

Acts 2:1-21

A little girl was visiting her grandmother one beautiful spring morning. They walked out into grandma's flower garden. As grandma was inspecting the progress of her flowers the little girl decided to try to open a rosebud with her own two hands. But no luck! As she would pull the petals open, they would tear or bruise or wilt or break off completely. Finally, in frustration, she said, "Gramma, I just don't understand it at all. When God opens a flower, it looks so pretty, but when I try, it comes apart." "Well, honey," grandma said, "There is a good reason for that. God is able to do it because he works from the inside out."

God works from the inside out. That is the great message of Pentecost Sunday, isn't it? This is what the disciples came to understand at Pentecost. Jesus has ascended into heaven. And he told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit.

Here is where the story of Pentecost picks up. The disciples are back in the Upper Room waiting and wondering and some of them were probably grumbling impatiently and nervously. What in the world are we doing here? All this waiting around is driving me up the wall! There's no use. He's gone and without him, we are nothing. It's over. We'd just as well face it. What is this Holy Spirit business anyway? Maybe we misunderstood him.

Just then they heard a sound. The breath of God began to blow on that place like the rush of a mighty wind. Images of fire danced around them. Suddenly, their fear was gone, replaced by peace and confidence, courage and strength and unity and they began to speak and communicate the word of God boldly and amazingly people from all different backgrounds heard and responded and 3,000 people were converted that day.

It's interesting to note that the three classic symbols for the Holy Spirit in the Bible remind us of how God works through us and how God works from the inside out. Do you remember what they are? The three traditional symbols of the Holy Spirit in the Bible: Breath-the symbol of life. Fire-the symbol of power. The descending dove-the symbol of peace. Let's take a look at these one at a time.

First, there is breath...the symbol of life and vitality. Remember in the Garden of Eden when God created Adam and Eve, he shaped them...but they were lifeless until he breathed into their nostrils the breath of life. They didn't really come alive until he breathed his spirit into them. Again we see it here at Pentecost. The breath of God, like the rush of a mighty wind, blew upon that place...and the disciples came alive.

How is it with you this morning? Is God in your life? Is the Holy Spirit in your soul? Has God's spirit breathed on you the breath of real life? If not, you are not really living! You may be existing, coping. You may be floating along...but until the Holy Spirit comes into your heart, you are numbered among the lifeless...you are numbered among the walking dead.

A hymn writer years ago recognized the importance of this and wrote these words:

Breathe on me breath of God. Fill me with life anew,

That I may love what Thou dost love, and do what Thou wouldst do.

Second, there is fire, the symbol of power. We often put those two words together, don't we? We talk about firepower. In the Bible, fire is often used as the symbol of God's presence and power. For example, we see it in the burning bush of Exodus and again in the New Testament story of Pentecost.

This power is not the power of brute force or blatant intimidation...not the power of political clout or wealth or weapons. But rather the power of knowing God's presence in our lives...and what that presence produces...integrity, honesty, commitment to a great cause. The sense of being God's co-worker, the assurance of God's love...there is nothing stronger than that. That's the firepower of Pentecost that fuels and mobilizes and energizes us...and enables us to do great things. Being totally convinced that God is with us and for us...and that he will ultimately win...and that nothing not even death can separate us from him...there is incredible power in that.

Third and finally, there is the descending dove...the symbol of peace. The early Christians in creating this symbol were very wise to show the dove descending because peace does indeed come from above. Inner peace...the poise, the serenity, the courage, the confidence to meet life and its troubles with steady eyes comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

Several times this past week, I was reminded of this. Several different conversations with different people revealed the peace that comes from having God in your life.

A woman who shared in one of our sessions at my workshop how she lost her brother in a freak accident.

A heartbroken mother grappling with the abrupt loss of a son she had not seen in some time.

A young couple who aches to have children, but has not been successful thus far and think about adoption. All of them are displaying a peace that passes understanding, a peace that comes only from the presence of God in their lives.

A teacher was asking her fourth grade class to name the person they considered the greatest person alive in the world today. Their responses were varied and interesting. Some named football players, movie stars, even presidents...and on and on it went with students mentioning a wide variety of celebrities.

But then it was Donnie's turn. Without hesitation Donnie said, "I think it's Jesus Christ because he loves everybody and is always ready to help them." The teacher smiled and said, "Well, I certainly like your answer, Donnie, because I'm a Christian too...and I also admire Jesus very much. But there's one slight problem. I said the greatest living person...and of course, Jesus lived and died over two thousand years ago. Do you have another name in mind?" I love the simple, innocent, confident, response of little Donnie. He said, "Oh no, that's not right at all. Jesus Christ is alive! He lives in me right now!"

That's the good news of our faith and the message of Pentecost. God is with us right now working from the inside out, giving us the breath of life, the fire power of commitment...and the peace that passes all understanding.