

Pentecost A 17

June 2, 2017

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Over the last few weeks I have been thinking, even preaching about the change and transitions taking place in the church and in the world around us. This comes from the book I have been reading talking about the shifts in the actions of church as we move from the modern age to the post-modern age. It is called post-modern because we know we are moving from the modern age to a new age, which has yet to be determined or understood.

This thought is confirmed by other scholars who also view the 500th anniversary of the Reformation as another great shift in time. Historical trends both within the church and within the wider world show that about every 500 years a major change takes place. The Reformation and the reforms it brought to the church coincided with the world moving from the dark ages into the age of enlightenment. These changes and reformations do not take place over night, but over a period of time. During which the people understand there is a change taking place that the ways of the past are being transformed to a new way of living. That living in the transition we are living in the already, that is a new era, and the not yet, as we continue to have one foot in the past.

As Lutherans we understand that way of thinking. We believe that we live in the already and the not yet. That is we already live in the new Kingdom of God on earth even as we await the return of Christ as he has promised. We are able to live in this paradox, this in-between time through our faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is this third part of the Trinity which is the focus of Pentecost for us as Christians.

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In the book of Acts, Luke give us an account of the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem just 50 days following the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. The Jewish people had come from the diasporas that is from the other lands after the people had moved from the homeland to other countries across the known world. They returned for the festival of Pentecost which was for them by one interpretation the celebration of the receiving of the Law by Moses during their wilderness journey. Here they gathered to remember that occasion just as they had done since the law was given to them.

Luke reinterprets this festival and repurposes it as the time for of the arrival of the Spirit as Jesus promised. Ten days earlier as Jesus met with the disciples and ascended in to heaven, Jesus told them to ‘when the power of the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.’ So they returned to Jerusalem to wait the coming of the Spirit. There they gathered with all the followers of Jesus, men and women alike. There they prayed and supported each other, they organized themselves even choosing Matthias as a replacement for Judas.

It is to this gathering of people on the day of Pentecost, all together in one place even as people from all across the world gathered outside their doors that the Spirit made her entrance. Make no mistake, the arrival of the Spirit did not come as a gentle breeze or a cute dove floating down out of the heavens. Here the Spirit came as a violent wind, as a tornado violently breaking in on those gathered. As the wind broke into that place, tongues of fire appeared and came upon everyone in the room, men and women, free and slave alike. There all kinds of chaos

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broke forth as they began to speak in other tongues and did other signs as enabled by the Spirit.

There those gathered both inside and outside of the house were amazed and perplexed by what they were witnessing. Amazed, not with joy and wonder but with fear and anxiety at what had taken place. While some truly wondered what was happening, others mocked them and called them drunk, dismissing this event as nothing other than human debauchery.

Then there were who I would call the first Lutherans asking Luther's age old question, 'what does this mean'. To which Peter gets up and launches into his first great sermon, as lead by the Spirit telling everyone about the saving grace of Jesus the Christ. This chaotic scene reminds us of the power of the Holy Spirit when she is released and has her way in the world. Which is scary for us because we do not know what is happening and things seem to be out of control.

I saw a presentation from one of my favorite preachers and scholars, Barbara Brown Taylor. She was speaking about the art of preaching, her life of faith the part the Spirit plays in her sermons. Two comments about the Spirit stood out for me. The first was; 'the Holy Spirit is something we trust, not something we understand.' Even for pastors, the Holy Spirit is not something we can understand but something I trust was with me as I wrote the words for this day and that she is active here, now as these words are spoken and heard. The Spirit is what makes the word of God active and alive in our lives. This is scary for me as well as for all of us, for the Spirit is active and does act in our lives in ways which will surprise, affirm, comfort and frighten us. But

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make no mistake, wither we want her to or not the Spirit will act. Which leads me to Barbara's second statement about the Spirit which was; 'We don't keep the Spirit of life in the back room because she is shy, but because she is dangerous.'

How often have we asked for the Spirit to come upon us when it is comfortable or convenient for us, so that the Spirit might confirm and affirm what we want to hear or do. But that is not the purpose or role of the Spirit. The Spirit comes to us and does it work, like it or not.

Yet It is during times of transitions like those we are currently living through, as we seek to exist in the already and the not yet, living within the chaos instead of asking for the coming of the Spirit we might also ask what is God up to?

Paul in the letter to the Corinthians is at work trying to help the people see what God is up to as they explore the many gifts the Spirit has unleashed in them. The people of Corinth had received and experienced the many gifts of the Spirit, the gifts of wisdom, of knowledge, of faith, of healing, of miracles, of prophecy and of tongues. Each was given a gift according to their ability and given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.'

Here Paul offers three suggestions to help us understand or answer the question of what God is up to? The first is the Spirit of God is always bearing witness to Jesus Christ as Lord as the first verse from our reading from Corinthians states. It is in listening for the Spirit's claims about Jesus that we will know that what is taking place around us is lead by the Spirit or not.

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The second point to look for is the Spirit's interest in the common life of the believers. While the gifts were received by individuals, the gifts are for the body as a whole. If the gift is not shared for the good of others then it is not a gift from the Spirit. This was especially true when they tried to rank the gifts as a way to claim authority over others.

Lastly the working of the Spirit is not characterized by tidiness, but when we are looking at the gifts of the Spirit there will be a bit of a mess. While there might be unity in their faith through their belief in Jesus there will not be uniformity. For Paul the goal is not a tidy community life but a loving one which he says more about in Chapter 13 which follows.

So even as we continue to live in the transitions taking place around us that the Spirit is at work in and around us in life. We know this whenever Jesus is proclaimed as Lord, wherever the gifts of the church are used for the common good and whenever love is shown to all.

AMEN

T.G.B.T.G.

Pastor Michael