

Pentecost as Paradigm

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It was an idyllic summer nearly twenty years ago, one of those golden places and times that becomes through long remembrance like a Rembrandt painting composed of shadowy images, here and there highlighted from within. Ten little girls, eight-year-olds, were snuggled into their camp bunks in the darkness. Mists were rising off the moonlit lake outside, but inside the cabin by waning flashlight provided the only illumination, darting from corner to corner as the questions also leaped back and forth during what we called “cabin time.”

Sometimes your first experience away from home makes you acutely aware of your questions about God. That particular night, questions flowed amid giggles and whispers—until one small voice put a stop to all extraneous sounds: “What *I* don’t understand is, how can God be only one thing but three things too? How can God be a father, a son, and a holy spirit all at one time?” I groped nervously among my own primitive understandings, searching in my own darkness for some clear-shaped answer that would illumine myself as well as these children and encourage them to love God rather than come eventually to ignore God. Suddenly that very Spirit came to my aid in the voice from the right-center bunk. It was Kim: “My mommy says it’s like an egg—you have the shell and the white part and the yolk, and they’re all different parts; but they are all *egg*.” It was as if ten light bulbs had come on in ten little heads. “Oh-hhh!” they chorused, nodding wisely, as if this were the most perfectly natural answer in the world; and their counselor was left holding her bag of theological complexities and smiling at herself in the shadows, for being surprised by the Simple One.

I’m sure they’ve remembered the answer, all these years: *I* certainly have!

Luke described that first post-resurrection Pentecost as a time in which all the gathered nationalities heard the twelve “speaking in their own language” about the marvels of God in a way that “amazed” those hearers. There was movement and color, as well as sound: something both visible and audible had happened among the believers. As Johannes Munck writes, “. . . what is significant is the fact that Jews, who had grown up with another language than that of Palestine, suddenly encountered the preaching about Christ *in the language of their native country*.”¹

All of us have grown up with other languages than that of Palestine; and yet preachers often persist in using a foreign and “religious” tongue. Amidst our convoluted debates over whether the Spirit-touched were indeed speaking in Parthian, Phrygian, and other dialects, or all of them in Hebrew (the “universal” language of Jewry), or whether this was a miracle of hearing instead, the eloquence of Luke’s message remains: When God’s Spirit is welcomed, the hearers receive the preaching about Jesus the Christ in the “language of their

native country”—that is, at the level of their deepest understanding. They are thereby led to explore further into holy territory, asking the question “What does this mean?”

The season of Pentecost which stretches before the church for six long months, from the last Sunday of May until the first Sunday of December, is a broadly comprehensive season. Some might even call it the church’s “grab bag.” Although the lectionary’s cycle B² includes a rich variety of texts drawn from 2 Samuel, Ephesians, James and other books, let us for the purposes of this brief article survey the almost endless-seeming series of readings from the Gospel of Mark—acts of Jesus, healings, teachings, commissionings of disciples. This long season which some communions call “ordinary time” seems to wander to the end of the year through a forest of diverse scandals and jealousies, concerns about money, discussions over propriety, competition for status, dilemmas of hospitality and legality, and all the meanings of disciples’ lives as seen through the eyes of Mark. This apparently monotonous meandering of the Pentecost season, of “ordinary time,” is nevertheless a parable told by the Spirit—a parable concerning the sacredness within the ordinary. And, I would propose, the proclamation of the initial texts which launch us into this far expanse are an announcement of paradigm for the rest of the liturgical year.

“Ordinary time,” significantly, is the season when many churchgoers drift away from worship. Of course, there is the string of good, solid excuses—graduation festivities, family vacations, the need to attend to the household with spring cleaning; but I would hazard a guess that after the majesty and mystery and clear rhythms of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany-Lent-Easter (mirroring pregnancy-birth-vocation-struggle-death-life), the subconscious reason for ceasing to engage with a worshipping community is that suddenly the message offered seems dull, devoid of color and dance (and how can we speak of life in the Spirit without color and dance?) and lacking in connectedness with everyday life. Whereas the disciplines of many Protestant denominations speak of the congregation’s mutual responsibility for preaching by means of preparedness to hear the Word, mental participation in the preaching becomes difficult when the words become pious and ethereal—when, as people say, “You’re just not speaking my *language*.” On the other hand, that participation comes naturally when the emphases of liturgical seasons closely parallel human experience: the birth of someone in the family . . . the difficulties of unplanned pregnancy . . . the questions raised by mid-life and mid-career crises . . . and, at the Easter end of life, the emotions experienced in the face of illness or death. While the Pentecost paradigm for the entire season of the Spirit is the discovery of a new language, Pentecost preaching more often seems cut adrift from those moorings, as we step back to examine “life-in-the-middle” at some length. The questions “How does a person *live* with the Spirit of God? What does a spirit-touched community look like? *Can* these bones live?”—the very questions which should be most intriguing and most instructive for the church—become the most foreign to reality for twentieth-century believers who live very much *in* the world.

We are uncomfortable, I think, with the Pentecost motif as it is set out in Acts 2, because we image it as a miracle story involving mystical “tongues” or

ecstatic dialects. That message seems sufficiently alien to a rationalistic view of things that we are relieved simply to touch upon it and then to leave it, moving on into what seems the more manageable (if mundane) material of "ordinary time." Pentecost is thus bracketed into one day, rather than extending like a sacred canopy over the "ordinary" season. "Not much happening here," is the word Pentecost preaching often conveys, in contrast to the mounting excitement of the earlier liturgical months; so that the congregation's approach to their ordinary life of faith also echoes "not much happening here." Together, we plod; until in Advent the church again enters a season to whose tempo we can dance. Ah! but look what *could* happen here:

When what seems so ordinary in the gospel is "re-imaged," then color and dance pervade the whole of the annual Christian cycle. I use the concept "re-imaging" as Carter Heyward uses it in her book, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation*,³ where she explains that if "imaging is a process of exploring and expressing something about reality . . . find[ing] a way of expressing relation,"⁴ then to re-image "is to claim the authority to play freely with both Scripture and subsequent tradition in order to comprehend our own existence."⁵ The product of our re-imaging will never fully coincide with any single image in Scripture, she says, because Jesus is not with us in the same ways he was with the people of New Testament times. "We need to re-image Jesus from the perspective of our own experiences in the world and, in so doing, image his most creative place in our consciousness."⁶

The preacher who re-images Pentecost will live into her texts; that is, carry them inwardly, walk into their depths on the streets of her community, and create spaces for confrontations among the Word and the words and her own life experience. If Acts 2:1-13 is paradigmatic for an entire season of church life, then the definitive question is where the Spirit interweaves the daily interactions among believers and nonbelievers, and between the sacred and secular cultures in which we are citizens.

Re-image the Spirit as living and accessible to contemporary men and women. Re-image flesh-and-blood persons as accessible to the Spirit. The large percentage of most congregations is not practiced in that mode of seeing which makes the Holy Spirit seem a live possibility in daily life. (As the child Opal Whiteley wrote in her diary, "I have longing for more eyes. There is much to see in this world all about.") The stage which can be set by Acts 2 for a new vision of the Spirit's coming is built on the message that the *true* Pentecostal miracle was each believer's experience of the Spirit of God "speaking their own language."

Now. How do you speak the languages of your brothers and sisters in faith, as you look into their faces across the long rows of pews? How would you raise dry bones to life, for example, for the number of women in any given church who have wrestled at some point in life with abusive religious systems? (Ponder the twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, John 8:2-11.)⁸ For that developmentally-disabled adult who may have difficulty with socialization skills? (Look into the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Mark 7:1-8.) For the judge in your congregation before whose bench pass daily cases of child abuse? (See Pentecost 19, Mark 9:38-50.) For the eight-year-old whose best understanding

of the triune God may be in the analogy of scrambled eggs? (Pentecost 10, John 6:1-15.) And how does the Holy Spirit open up the weekly texts for that youth who is trying his best to suppress the dreaming of dreams, in order to attain a longed-for, worldly sophistication among peers and in the eyes of adults? For the elderly woman who has forgotten how to see visions, in her bored fascination with daily soap opera vignettes? You see, if the Spirit of God is going to communicate through us in different “native languages,” the twentieth-century pastor/preacher must at least be clear about the “tongues” represented in his or her faith community.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke knew that our images of God may prevent us from coming into contact with the true God:

You, neighbour God, if sometimes in the night
I rouse you with loud knocking, I do so
only because I seldom hear you breathe;
I know: you are alone.
And should you need a drink, no one is there
to reach it to you, groping in the dark.
Always I hearken. Give but a small sign.
I am quite near.

Between us there is but a narrow wall,
and by sheer chance; for it would take
merely a call from your lips or from mine
to break it down,
and that without a sound.

The wall is builded of your images.

They stand before you hiding you like names,
And when the light within me blazes high
that in my inmost soul I know you by,
the radiance is squandered on their frames.

And then my senses, which too soon grow lame,
exiled from you, must go their homeless ways.⁹

Similarly, it may be our mental imagery of the Holy Spirit that blocks our experiencing of the Spirit. It is to this situation that I share the call to be those who re-image ancient texts. Re-image, for instance, the debate over sabbath rules and fine points of the law (Pentecost 2, Mark 2:23-3:6): Image Jesus as sovereign and recreator of sabbath time, and “recreation” takes on startling new meaning. It is no longer unclaimed time, legally fenced off from work, but rather that given for God’s purpose—*holy* time, in which Jesus’ interaction nourishes what is hungry and restores what is withered. “Recreation” as time for the activity of the Spirit is a relevant word for those at the beginning of a summer season as well as the early Sundays of Pentecost.

Re-image the story of a hemorrhaging woman (Pentecost 6, Mark 5:24-34) who appears to be healed by power-from-without, the touch of Jesus’ garment: Her chronic condition, worsening with year after year of yielding her own care

to outside authority, is reversed at the point of her decision to become the agent in her own healing. She decides on a course of action; she acts; and she needs no extraneous authority to confirm the result. ("she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.") Re-image the account of this anonymous woman's healing, which has nevertheless lived in the chronicles of faith history, as both gift and fruit of the Spirit!

Re-image "authority over the unclean spirits" (Pentecost 8, Mark 6:7-13) as a relevant concept for Christians in an era of advanced nuclear research, biogenetics, and microchip technology. Re-image these first-century travel guidelines for itinerant evangelists into a congruent proclamation for those who journey with the Spirit in our own age, by exploring the readiness of a heart not bound by weighty doctrinal assumptions already limiting the possibilities of encounter with the Spirit. Re-image verse 11, discovering with your hearers how the stance of a liberated person of faith would look in a neurotic and unjust world.

Perhaps the task which I address, this "re-imaging," means above all not to allow the Pentecost proclamation to stall at either the level of (1) what the text meant literally in its first-century context, or (2) what it seems to mean to twenty-first century minds attempting to apply a first-century understanding; but to build further upon those foundations in order to grasp the immediacy of the Holy Spirit's interplay on our "ordinary" lives. What seems so self-evident as I write it, and no doubt as it is read, nevertheless must be repeated constantly as a "reality check" for modern interpreters of the living Word.

The work of the Holy Spirit is to find new language: and faithful preaching knows its ultimate dependence upon God's Spirit. Even so, we are always reminded that the Pentecost experience is something that cannot be communicated, but only hinted at, in words. To hint at it—to offer clues and glimpses in such a way that spiritual tinder is sparked and metabolism fueled, and deep wellsprings are opened connecting the ordinary seasons of life with the very breath of God—is our persistent task. May we who are called to preach speak in all the tongues of human experience, as the Spirit gives us utterance!

NOTES

¹ *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), 14.

² I have referred to texts in the *Inclusive Language Lectionary*, following the readings from the Table of Readings and Psalms prepared by the North American Committee on Calendar and Lectionary.

³ Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, Inc., 1982).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷ Opal Whiteley, *Opal: The Journal of an Understanding Heart*, adapted by Jane Boulton (Palo Alto: Tioga Publishing Company, 1984), 111.

⁸ The Inclusive-Language Lectionary Committee determined that it is appropriate to add certain alternative lections about women that have not been included in the listing recommended by the North American Committee on Calendar and Lectionary, in order to reflect an inclusiveness of all persons in the lectionary cycle. This is one such reading.

⁹ “You, Neighbour God.” in *Poems from the Book of Hours*, trans. by Babette Deutsch. (New Directions Publishing Company, 1941).