

Earth, Wind and Fire!

Pentecost – May 23, 2021

UMCG

When was the last time you attended a family reunion? It's been ages since I attended a family reunion, but last November I reconnected with some cousins on my Dad's side of the family right before Veterans Day to reminisce about our parents' military service in WW II. That's when we decided we just had to have a family reunion. So that's going to happen July 10th as the Darr cousins gather from across the country in our home town of Akron, Ohio. My sister Dianne and her husband Bud live there and will anchor the event. I'm sure we'll have a blast and I can't wait to hear the family stories – both old and new - the funny and sad – the fables and the foibles – the ridiculous and sublime – *stories* that ground us in our identity as “Darrs.”

Barbara Brown Taylor—preacher *par excellence*—recently retired college professor of world religions, and bestselling author, in an article about Pentecost titled “God's Breath” (how appropriate for Pentecost), notes that church families and personal families are much alike. Just like our family stories, every church family has a story of origin, a “kind of primordial memory of its own birth.” And if you really want to understand a church's unique personality, a great place to start is the story of how it all got started. These stories get told and retold, forming, shaping, and re-shaping each person who walks through the church's door.
(Pause)

Today is Pentecost, the birthday of the church universal. Interestingly, we find more than one birth story of the church in the Gospels. We have two birth narratives to choose from. Today we read Luke's story of the founding of the church in the book of Acts chapter 2. The other story of the birth of the church is found in John's Gospel, chapter 20:19-23.

If we really think about it, we shouldn't be surprised that there are in fact two different stories of the birth of the church. After all, we have two different authors, with different theological slants, addressing the needs of two different church communities, in two different parts of the Roman Empire in the 1st century CE.

Both stories take place after Jesus's resurrection. John's story, however, occurs on Easter, the very day of Jesus's resurrection. In Luke, the church is born 50 days after the resurrection, hence the word Pentecost. ("Pente" meaning 50.) Interestingly, in both stories, the church is born in a house. In John, it's in an upper room of a house that's locked tight with 11 *male* apostles huddling in terror, fearing that they too might be executed. In Luke, it's just the opposite! The house is filled with some 120 people who've left the doors and windows wide open. Why? In expectation of the arrival of something from God that would empower them to be witnesses of the risen Christ.

As you may recall, in John's story, the risen Christ mysteriously comes right through the walls of the locked doors of the house and quietly greets the 11 male disciples with the reassuring words, "Peace be with you." Next, he commissions them saying, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." (By the way, this is John's "Great Commission" and it differs from the other Gospels where Jesus commissions his disciples from a mountain top.) And then what did he do? Jesus breathed on them, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." In John's Gospel, the church was born, up there, in that locked upper room with the gentle breath of Jesus breathing the Spirit into them. Filled with the Spirit, they are commissioned to do what? "As the Father has sent me, so I send you!" Why did God send Jesus into the world? To incarnate God's love in all we think, say and do. To incarnate God's love for the whole person – body, soul and mind. To incarnate God's love in families, communities and society. To love all of creation (not just humans) and care for it – on earth and sky and sea. To love as Jesus loved, to live as Jesus lived and to share the Good News of God's love for all.

Luke, in Acts 2, our passage today, says nothing of gentle breath blown on the disciples. Oh no! Here, the Holy Spirit rushes upon the many disciples in that open house in Jerusalem with a violent windstorm, tongues of fire and thunderous noise! Earth, wind and fire indeed! God's Spirit is poured out on all people—not just eleven male disciples, not just a chosen few, not just religious people, but all people—young and old, sons and daughters, male and female, slave and free, straight and gay, red and yellow, black and white - all are precious in God's sight!

We're told that the house is filled with "tongues of fire" and Jesus's disciples start speaking in tongues, in many different languages, so that a host of strangers from the four corners of the earth hear the Gospel, the Good News, in their own language. God is a God who speaks through all, is present in all, and who not only welcomes all languages, but is incarnated through them! (Pause)

Earlier this week I was asked to share with the Spirited Women here at church (that's an appropriate name for them at Pentecost, eh! Spirited!) I was asked to share about the creation care mission I'm involved with in West Africa. I was even asked to open the Zoom meeting with prayer in the Bamana language. The language of the Bamana, or Bambara, people of West Africa among whom my folks served as missionaries. A reminder that, yes indeed, God is a God who speaks through all, is present in all, and who not only welcomes all languages but is also incarnated in people and through their languages! (Pause)

At Pentecost, the Spirit gathers people from around the world. At Pentecost, we find representatives of all God's children, gathered in one place, filled by the Holy Spirit who would empower them to continue Christ's ministry from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Barbara Brown Taylor refers to John's account as a story of a "Gentle Breath" congregation. Hmm. I like that. Luke's story, however, depicts a "Violent Wind" type of congregation. In the Gentle Breath story, "the *church* has received the Holy Spirit, the *world* has not, and it's the church's job to bring the Spirit into the world" and then bring converted individuals back into the church to know God. (Have you been in a church with that kind of emphasis?)

Members of Luke's "Violent Wind" congregation, on the other hand, "have no illusion that they have what it takes to guard God's Spirit...they go out into the *world* counting on the Spirit to guide them to **where the Spirit is already at work**. They may find the Spirit absolutely **anywhere**—that's how free God is—in a protest gathering, at a Habitat (for Humanity) building site, in the beauty parlor of a nursing home, around a family supper table," at Hased House and Lazarus House and Appalachia as well. Anywhere!

Rev. Taylor goes on to say, “As different as John’s and Luke’s church birth stories are, what they share is a common understanding that **only God can spot a church**. Yeah...only God can spot a church! It doesn’t have to have a sign out front, a Sunday school, a copy machine, or adequate parking lot, although those things may certainly help. All it has to have are some people with a story about how their life together began, who know what it’s like to be locked up, short of breath, *waiting* (for what they don’t always know). And who also know what it’s like to be revived by some mysterious, divine breath, whether it comes as gently as a sigh, or so violently that it turns the furniture upside down. If they are lucky, (Rev. Brown goes on to say) most churches get a dose of both before they’re through...God gave the church to the world **not to possess the Spirit, but to serve the Spirit, wherever in the world the Spirit may be found.**” Amen.

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*Barbara Brown Taylor, “God’s Breath,” *Journal for Preachers*, 2003.