



The Vulnerable Spirit

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Acts 2:1-21 & Romans 8:24-26

Pentecost

May 24, 2015

Opening Sentences: Pentecost is the birthday of the Church. It is when we celebrate the gift of the Spirit to God's family. The gifts of the Spirit are many, and hope, according to Paul, is one of the greatest gifts of the Spirit. Listen to his word from Romans as we set the tone for today's gathering: ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in *hope* we were saved. Now hope that is *seen* is not hope. For who hopes for what is *seen*? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.¹

Pentecost Introduction: Although I'm going to focus on the Romans passage with which we began the service, this story is the classic text for Pentecost. It is the story of Holy Spirit anointing the church with hope.

Scripture Reading:

2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."²

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And so we have this story about them looking like they're drunk early in the day and I suppose that's one sign of the Spirit's presence, but the one that I want you to latch onto is that if you were to leave our worship today with your hope deepened it would be a witness to the presence of the Spirit moving among us and the tongue of flame on each of us.

Today we talk about the Holy Spirit. Out there in the public conversation, I sometimes hear some unhelpful things about how the Spirit leads us, about the "leading of the Spirit," and I want to offer a

¹ Romans 8:22-26.

² Acts 2:1-13.

The Vulnerable Spirit

corrective to that today. And also today, I'm going to touch again on the issue of race. It's too easy for us as a predominantly white congregation not to think about race, and it's healthy for us to keep it in view. But I'm focusing primarily on hope as the gift of the Holy Spirit. Let me remind you of the opening sentences from Romans: "...not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in *hope* we were saved. Now hope that is *seen* is not hope. For who hopes for what is *seen*? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

Please pray with me: Holy God illumine us all. Touch us again by your spirit, that your promise may find a deeper home in our hearts; that the hard ground within us may be furrowed and find a home for your Word. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

My friend Tom—whom I'm constantly quoting—you know I must have had 15 different papers on Pentecost that I could have looked at, but of course my eyes lit on what Tom had to write. That's the thing about a friend who can speak to your heart. Tom was describing the waiting room in a hospital. He said the waiting room, it's just like other rooms. "People drink their morning coffee and read the paper. They make phone calls or tell stories. Sometimes conversations are ignited between strangers: 'How old is she, 15 months? Mine just turned three.' You know, that sort of thing, the common everyday conversation that we have. All the normal stuff takes place; the same things we do every day. But the difference is that in the waiting room someone is on the other side of that door. And that someone is shaping what's important and what matters in this room at this moment. In the midst of the stories and newspapers and crossword puzzles there's always an eye on the door."³

On Pentecost the Spirit blew in and turned this world into a waiting room. The Spirit blew in and anointed the Church with hope, hope in what's on the other side of that door, across the horizon and into God's future.

Scholar Luke Timothy Johnson says, "The ground of hope is the gift of the Holy Spirit, the transforming power from God that enables Christians to see new life coming to birth where the eyes of others see only disaster, [to see] resurrection where others see only death." It is hope that blew in with the Spirit on Pentecost. Hope that keeps an eye on that door, where what's unseen shapes what matters here. Paul calls that reality on the other side "when the children of God will be revealed." Revelation calls it "a new heaven and a new earth." We call it—our destiny, the love that waits or when God will be all in all—whatever we call it, the Spirit gives us hope so that that unseen vision, *that* will shape what matters here, even when things don't seem all that different to us at all.

That was clearly the case for the early church, right? The first century church, newly anointed with the Spirit, faced frequent oppression—from the stoning of Stephen later on in Acts until the persecution under Domitian at the end of the century, the Church felt the suffering in the world profoundly. And the Spirit came and didn't change the circumstances. The Spirit's gift is not marked by the end of our groaning. Pentecost didn't mark the end of suffering. Paul says, the whole creation and we ourselves,

³ Tom Are, from an unpublished paper for the Moveable Feast—2009: Santa Fe, New Mexico.

The Vulnerable Spirit

who have the Spirit, groan. We still suffer; thus, the sermon title: *The Vulnerable Spirit*. The vulnerable Spirit: the Spirit that may even lead us to vulnerability.

Now, I want to point out the cover of our bulletin today. That is the Presbyterian seal, the symbol of our denomination, and it illumines this truth about the Spirit quite clearly. One of the many eloquent things about this symbol is how the flames of the Spirit are part of it; they are part of the cross. It's all one symbol. The Spirit is vulnerable. It changes the world into a waiting room, and it imbues us with hope, but it does not end the sorrow or the tears. It does not remove the cross. Now, that must seem fairly obvious to you all, but when I hear folks out there talk about the *leading* of the Spirit, this seems to be forgotten.

It's not always easy to tell where the Spirit is leading us. It's very much like being... taken by the wind, blown by the wind. And there are a lot of breezes out there. How are we to discern the leading of this vulnerable Spirit? Knowing what we've just said about the Spirit should help us get rid of some false notions.

You see, often when you hear people talk about the Spirit's guiding, they'll say things like, "Everything just fell into place. Everything went so smoothly. We'd encountered so much resistance, until we followed the Spirit and then everything got easier." And what it sounds like is that they are saying that, when the Spirit leads, it is always down the path of least resistance.

Now, life is often struggle, so when we get a little reprieve from that, well, it really can feel like the gift of God, and in fact, I would say quite often it is. But always equating the two – the easier and less difficult with the leading of the Spirit – is not smart.

I'm going to try to exemplify this in a very round about way. Believe it or not, I have been pulled over for a traffic violation – only a couple times, actually, which might surprise you, and it's been quite a long time now – but I remember the experiences vividly. What happens when you get pulled over? In my case, the officer comes to the driver's window. He says, "License and registration, please." And while I'm looking for my papers, he peeks around the vehicle, and Karen tries not to look too embarrassed. That is the experience.

The one I remember clearest was when we'd slid off the road in Idaho. The officer was rightly planning to cite me for violating basic speed law; that's how we ended up in the ditch. I went too fast on the ice. Now this happened exactly on our first anniversary while we were trying to get back to our internship church to preach the next day. And I will confess that I let these little remarkable facts, come out in the conversation with the officer – I'm glad we've confessed our sins already this morning – and I didn't get a ticket. And on another occasion, coming back from a wedding, I remember that wearing my collar really helped.

Others' paths are not so smooth. Jim and Sonja Fryer are members of Westminster. And they're up in Traverse City this weekend, but they gave me permission to tell these stories that I wanted to share with you. One day driving in Alpena, they were pulled over. Sonja, in good, typical supportive partner role told me that, just before being pulled over, she had been suggesting to Jim from her passenger seat that he was perhaps exceeding the recommended velocity for that locale. He said, "Yup, I was speeding." When stopped, the officer asked Jim, who was driving, for his license and registration. Then, after peeking

The Vulnerable Spirit

around the vehicle, and Sonja probably trying her best not to say, “I told him to slow down!” he said to Sonja, “OK, I need to see your license too, ma’am.” Well, that never happened to Karen in my car. I mean, have any of you ever been asked for your license while you were in the passenger seat? It might help you to understand that, if you don’t know the Fryers, Jim is white and Sonja’s black. Sonja, being Sonja, asked, “Why do you need to see *my* license, Officer?” You know her. The officer curtly snapped, “You’re not in a position to question me, ma’am. I’m an officer of the law,” and he insisted on her license. Now, rather than risking what might follow, were she to object further, Sonja did have her license with her—thank God—and handed it over.

They were also telling me stories of when they’re at a restaurant and they get the bill, invariably, Sonja and Jim are asked, “How shall I divide this?” or “Separate checks?” I’ve tried to imagine what it would be like, always having to insist, “No, we’re together...” Their daughter, Grace, who’s Asian, has developed a habit, they say, of hanging all over her parents at restaurants and saying again and again, “Mommy and Daddy, Mommy and Daddy” to stave off the, “Are you together?” question, because it hurts for her to hear it.

So, if following the Spirit were merely taking the path of least resistance, the Fryers should choose *not* to be a family. That would be the easier route. The Spirit *may* lead us into paths that attract resistance. Obviously. If Rosa Parks had thought that the path of least resistance was the only way the Holy Spirit led, she’d have gone right to the back of the bus where she was told to stand.

The path of least resistance does not necessarily indicate the leading of the Holy Spirit. As in our symbol, the Spirit is connected to the cross. Discernment of the Spirit includes looking to the life of Jesus. His path was resisted, but that did not mean that the Spirit had abandoned him. His path *led* to resistance, not only *external* resistance, but to Gethsemane, where *he* resisted. The path of the Spirit cannot be identified with the smoother road, else Jesus would have bypassed wilderness, Gethsemane and Golgotha. And Sonja and Jim would have abandoned one another and their family. And, of course, we would not have done any of the hard and faithful things that we have had to do against resistance. So, we need to be very careful not to identify “easy” with the Spirit.

On the other hand, Sonja’s handing over her license, instead of fighting the indignity of that request, *was* taking a path of lesser resistance. Following the Spirit doesn’t mean picking every fight, either. The timing of Rosa Parks’ refusal was calculated. Rosa wasn’t an old lady who just got tired and decided to sit down. Rosa was groomed and prepared. And the timing of her protest was a calculated, community decision.

My seminary professor for Christian Ethics was Daniel Berrigan. Father Berrigan knew about resistance and the movement of the Holy Spirit. One of the many wise things that he taught us was, “Don’t be a small tinder in a big flame. Timing, the occasion, the effect of one’s sacrifice—all of these are worth considering.” And I know that most of the martyrs’ names we will never know this side of heaven, because they didn’t get to choose.

Did you see that Pope Francis has just beatified Oscar Romero? It’s an amazing thing. Archbishop Romero was assassinated for his vocal solidarity with the poor of El Salvador. The path of least resistance for him would have been to remain silent and in solidarity with the powerful. But Oscar Romero also was

The Vulnerable Spirit

no small tinder. We *all* know his name and story. Thank God. And because we do, the names of the disappeared, the martyrs, for whom Romero worked so tirelessly, will also not be lost, even *this* side of heaven.

I am glad that Sonja handed over her license. Like most black women I know, she has had to suppress her anger and outrage countless times. I don't want her consumed in a large flame. So we who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we groan inwardly while we await the revealing on the other side of that door.

I am grateful for the Pentecost Spirit that allows us to see that on the other side of that door, Sonja doesn't even get asked that question. And I am grateful that that vision is supposed to form what matters here. That vision is our human destiny. It is our hope in the midst of sorrow that allows us to trust in the love that's coming and allows it to shape what matters on this side. It matters that people are judged solely by the content of their character. And we suffer when that does not happen. And that suffering is the leading of the Spirit.

When we seek to discern the Spirit's leading, we look to Jesus. And his path includes the cross, but of course it doesn't end there. It goes by way of sorrow. It goes by way of tears, but it does not end there. Christ's trajectory took an unexpected leap in resurrection. That's the vision on the other side of the door. That is the hope that the Spirit gives us in the midst of sorrow and tears: to expect resurrection life.

We hope in what is unseen and we wait. It was hope that came with the Spirit at Pentecost. It is hope rooted on the other side of that door, hope rooted in what is unseen. But we do get glimpses, like Romero's beatification, I think, there's a glimpse there, a final redemption. And there are echoes of those things in which we hope.

I want to thank Mark DeVries for telling me about this song one Sunday. I don't know what I was preaching, but he said "You're gonna want to listen to this song." I wanted to sing it after I heard it. It is about groaning with hope rooted in what's coming.

You've been taken by the wind, You have known the kiss of sorrow,
Doors that would not let you in, Outcast and a stranger.

You have come by way of sorrow, you have come by way of tears,
But you'll reach the destiny meant to find you all these years,
Meant to find you all these years.

You have drunk a bitter wine with none to be your comfort,
You who once were left behind will be welcome at love's table.

You have come by way of sorrow, you have taken a long way home,
But the love that waits for you, you will someday come to know,
You will one day come to know.

All the nights that joy has slept will awake to days of laughter,
Gone the tears that you have wept,
You'll dance in freedom ever after.

The Vulnerable Spirit

You have come by way of sorrow, you've come over a stony ground,
But when love calls out your name, you will lay your burden down,
You will lay your burden down.

You have come by way of sorrow, you have come by way of tears,
But you'll reach the destiny meant to find you all these years,
Meant to find you all these years.⁴

We hope for what we do not see, and we wait. We keep our eye on the door. Tom said in that waiting room, “when the door opens, everyone stops. Everyone looks. Well maybe not *everyone*. Sometimes there is some yahoo who continues talking about this or that, and in the silence that follows opening the door you hear, ‘I knew he was going to catch that pass,’ or something trivial like that. That person thinks he is in a room. That person has no idea it’s a waiting room.”⁵ But we do. We have been gifted with hope, and so we keep an eye on the door.

Tom told me about his visit a couple of years ago to Palestine to visit Bishara Awad. The story puts a fine point on it. Bishara is the President of Bethlehem Bible College in the West Bank. From the balcony of the college you can look over the collection of little huts and shops that kneel before the wall—you know, *the* wall. The wall stands taller than anything else in Bethlehem. On top of the wall are the security turrets with rifles pointing to the narrow streets below. Just over the hill is Jerusalem, where Bishara has family, family that he cannot travel to see on holidays or when they are sick. When his niece gets married Bishara cannot officiate, for as a Palestinian, he is forbidden to travel the short distance to Bethlehem. Tom asked him if it were difficult to maintain hope. Bishara responded, “Tom, we live in the land of the resurrection. It is impossible not to hope.” Bishara Awad lives in a waiting room; as do we, as does the entire world.

The Spirit came on Pentecost and anointed us with hope and made this world a waiting room. Keep your eye on the door.

Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief. Let the people say: Amen.

⁴ Julie Miller, *By Way Of Sorrow*, Blue Pony, ©1997 by Hightone Records.

⁵ Tom Are, *Op. Cit.*