

Opening Up to the Breath of Life Readings: Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23 Pentecost/A
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I recently read a story about a young college woman who became involved in the civil rights movement during the 1960's. She was arrested during this time of great political and social upheaval in our country. She truly believed that by protest and action, she and her fellow activists could create a better society and actually change the world. So as part of that commitment, she spent a brief part of her senior year as one of the few white people at a black college in South Carolina. It was a very powerful experience for her. She saw appalling poverty at close hand for the first time and became conscious of the gap between the lives of black people and her own. It was then she began to realize that something radical would have to change for the world to be put right. Here is her story:

"One day I was out walking with a roommate, a young black lady from one of the islands off the South Carolina coast. She was frightened because the state was one of the most conservative and it wasn't good for a black person to be seen walking with a white. She was very jumpy. Before long a pick-up truck, which had followed me around a lot while I was there, pulled up beside us. I looked around and realized that the men in the truck were members of a white racist organization I had heard about. My friend said: 'Just get out of here, this is trouble,' and fled.

"Innocent as I was, I thought people could just be reasoned with, so I stayed and waited. A man jumped out of the truck carrying a baseball bat. He stared at me and called me 'nigger lover.' Then he lifted the baseball bat and struck my knees. I fell to the ground and another man started kicking me. A car mercifully came by and the men left before any further damage could be done.

"My knees were badly hurt but more importantly, my life changed that day. I saw in the eyes of those men a hatred so deep, an evil so powerful that it was more than just human: it was a larger evil, a violence that could take over a group of people. I looked into the face of the leader while they were assaulting me and kept asking, "Why are you doing this?" All he could say was, "You nigger-lover,' over and over again. There was such bitterness and hatred inside of him.

"I realized that for all the idealism I and many others were espousing, there was a fundamental need to change the human heart before any real progress could be made. What I saw in that man's face was the fact that behind so much of the disorder of the world are some very broken people who, when banded together, become a very effective force for evil. And I began to question whether social protest and changing laws alone could solve the problems." {by Carol Andersen: [Knowing Jesus in Your Life](#)}

Social protests, lifting up one's voice, organizing, and implementing laws are all important in creating a just society. I admire those who risk their lives and contribute their time, talent, and treasure for the common good. However, I do know that these efforts do not necessarily change the human heart which is why peace is so hard to come by. For instance, think about the murder and mayhem that erupted in the Balkan States after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Once the "iron hand" was lifted, people who had lived together in peace for 50 years began to turn against one another. While the Soviet Union and its laws kept them all in order, it did little to change their hearts. The hatred that had once laid dormant now felt at liberty to spew its darkness. Unfortunately, we continue to see this phenomenon expressed in our own country, as racial and religious prejudices spill out of the mouths of some of our citizens who scapegoat those who are different. When will this tension ever end?

There are many spirits operating in the world today. Some of these spirits are self-serving, goading us to focus only on "me-myself-and I." Others are darker spirits, driving us towards cynicism, parochialism, hopelessness, and despair. And at the extreme end are the evil spirits that deceive us into acting out of violence, hatred, and the disregard for human life and dignity. We must learn to discern and differentiate these spirits and choose only those that give life.

Today we are celebrating the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth "who leads us into all truth and enables us to grow in the likeness of Christ. The Holy Spirit is the Third person of the Trinity, God at work in the world and in the Church even now." {BCP 852} This is the Paraclete, the Spirit of God who walks alongside us as advocate, helper, counselor, mediator, intercessor, and truth teller. It is this

Spirit of God that transformed the disciples from a place of fear to a place of courage. It is this Spirit of God that can transform the human heart. Let's take a look at our first reading.

The context is Jerusalem, some 2000 years ago, following the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. The date is Pentecost, 50 days after the Jewish Passover. Having been told to wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the apostles were all together in one room, having spent significant time in prayer. Suddenly from heaven "there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability." {Acts 2} Imagine having that experience?

Sometimes, the Holy Spirit comes into our lives through a still, small voice or a faint stirring in the heart. If we don't pay attention, we can easily miss its subtle and fragile promptings. This gentle approach of the Holy Spirit allows us to "inch" towards the kingdom. This is a slow and measured approach to transformation sometimes described like "a gentleman who never forces his way in and only goes where he is invited." But the first few verses of Acts 2 depict the Holy Spirit as a hurricane gale force, using vivid images of wind and fire. This description of the Spirit as being a strong, spiritual power where sparks fly, hearts soar, and people's lives are radically transformed, describe the experience of many who have joined the Pentecostal movement. Such strong spiritual power can create congregations who sing with their hearts, pray without ceasing, and extend themselves for others.

I was once with a group of 30 women pastors who came together to learn and practice the spiritual disciplines over a period of three years. One of the women (who was a Korean and Methodist minister) led us in a prayer practice where all of us prayed out loud together for 10 minutes in our own voices and with our own petitions. Within a short time, I could feel the sparks of energy circulating around the room, knowing for certain that the Holy Spirit was very present with us as we joined together in honest prayer. This is what I believe happened to those disciples some 2000 years ago who had spent days in prayer in preparation for receiving the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into their lives.

So how do we discern the spirits of our time? How do we know when the Holy Spirit is working in our lives rather than some kind of emotionalism? Discerning the spirits requires spiritual maturity which is why we need to ground ourselves in Scripture and obey the commandments by living a virtuous life. How do we Christians recognize the Holy Spirit in our lives? "We recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit when we confess Jesus Christ as Lord and are brought into love and harmony with God, with ourselves, with our neighbors, and with all creation." {BCP 852} This means any kind of alienation, prejudice, hard-heartedness, or disrespect for the environment and the created order, comes from the evil one which has no connection with the life-giving Spirit of God.

As I re-read the Book of Acts, a few things stand out for me about recognizing the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to preach God's word and to be understood even in languages they did not know. This Spirit empowered numerous awe-inspiring signs and wonders during the early church as people sold their possessions and goods and distributed the proceeds to all as any had need. These spirit-led followers of Jesus broke bread together at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. The Spirit gave them gifts of healing and the courage to confront threats and resistance during their ministry. The Holy Spirit is a uniting force that propels people from different nationalities and races to communicate with one another to the point of understanding and working together. It is a Spirit of forgiveness that empowers us to forgive and let go of past resentments so that we can live into a new future.

We now are now living in a time in which there are so many challenges in our world; a time in which the fearless prophetic voices of authentic followers of Jesus are desperately needed. This prophetic voice can only be spoken by those empowered by the truth-telling Spirit of God. If the Episcopal Church in general and Trinity Church in particular want to thrive into the future as a visible force that is relevant in the 21st century, then it is imperative that we nurture the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our congregation through prayer, worship, service to others, and humility. Then and only then will human hearts be transformed. Come Holy Spirit, come!