

Touched By Mystery; Tested By Experience

Pentecost, the Birthday of the Church

Acts 10:34-48, John 4:16-24

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Spring Lake, Michigan
June 8, 2003

Transcription of the spoken sermon

A few weeks ago, two or three, we had an experience of Pentecost at Christ Community. It was a Ministry Council meeting at which we were meeting some of the folks who were received this morning at the earlier hour and this hour. That is always the favorite time for all of us who are in that capacity because it is a time when we hear the stories of people. Over the years, those have been wonderful evenings.

I remember in the 70s when our growth was off the charts that time after time we heard people experience or witness to the grace that they experienced when they came here. Some of us who have been around a long time look at each other on occasion, when we have such an experience, and say, "Well, it's still happening."

About three weeks ago on a Monday night, it was that kind of a meeting. We heard wonderful stories. When that happens, I wish you could all be in the balcony listening in and experiencing that, because it really is an affirmation and a tribute to you as a people who embody the grace that is experienced by those who come in. I thought to myself that I could at least give you a taste, and so I have asked Cindy, whom we just received into this community in kind of an official way, to come up here. She has been hanging around for a long time, in classes, in worship, and I know you have seen Cindy, but I have asked her to share a bit of her story with you.

Last week Sunday in this very spot we gave congratulations to our graduates, and Dick turned to me and said, "Congratulations, Cindy." I was a bit stunned, looking back at him. And he said, "After all, you have in essence, graduated "

All of our journeys involve graduations. Our journeys involve credible rewards and distinct, painful wounding. My journey includes all of that, as well. And yet, it is in all of those experiences that I am here able to speak and able to be accepted into this body.

I was raised in the Christian Reformed Church, went to Christian schools, did summer workshops, missions, was a youth group leader, and all of it. As they

say, I bought it hook, line and sinker. I had many experiences in the church through all those years. In college I married a man who, until the last six months, was a Reformed Church minister, so you would say that I did church really well as a minister's wife. I knew the doctrines, I knew the polity, the politics, I did it all. Along the way from my childhood, I learned one lesson when I was very young and it has stuck with me. If you ask questions that are outside the box, you will be insulted, you will be judged, you will be bruised, and you will be abandoned. That lesson has been difficult for me to learn. I have been raised with a heart for justice and love for all people, and it didn't seem to fit what I was hearing in my experience in the church.

It got to be the late 80s, and our family moved to a church in Holland. There is when the rumblings really began inside myself. I could not seem to understand and accept what I was hearing in my church, what I was hearing from my community, what I was hearing from even family and friends to be my own story. I struggled terribly. My family struggled with me. They did not understand and I confused them. I knew I was upsetting the applecart and I knew I was in a horrible spot. So, now what to do?

I desperately kept on searching to find a spot where I would be accepted and cared and loved for all my questions, a spot that could accept openness to all people. So, a friend suggested that I contact Dick,

He invited me to a Wednesday night class and we studied John Douglas Hall with a number of you in this room. It was a group that I heard language from that was familiar and unfamiliar. It was a group with Colette and Dick in their leadership that stimulated, activated some things. Also, I could see people were wrestling with the same kinds of problems and difficulties that I had had in my past. It was a group that warmly accepted me, accepted the struggles that I was having as the director of Camp Sunshine in those years. I saw what was going on here in this congregation. And yet, I tried to find a balance between being involved in the church in Holland and trying to follow my heart, too.

When I attended a workshop with Marcus Borg, and it was through Marcus Borg's books and that workshop that I was able to give new language to what I had been feeling in my heart, new language that could frame it in a way that was acceptable, that I could speak of it, that was true to me, and that I felt very honest and good about. It was through this place.

There were others in The Center for Religion and Life, other theologians that were also delightful to hear, to learn their walk and watch a congregation such as you be open, accepting to all people, to have dialogue. That is what I was looking for in my life, I was looking for dialogue about the incarnation, about people's walks, about pluralism, all those kinds of things. Yet, I found that it was fear that kept people from doing this, it was fear that kept a congregation from speaking about it, and it was fear and continues to be fear that keeps communities from speaking. But, not this place. This place accepted and

accepts. This place loves and this place is safe. It is you people who have walked the tough walk, and yet, you are there to affirm, you are there to love, you are there to accept, and I appreciate greatly how you are. I appreciate the thoughtful preaching, mindful conversations, and the absolute acceptance to having no answers.

On this day, as a woman and as a mother and as a wife, I am grateful that I have followed my heart. I am grateful that I have been true to myself, and I can honestly say that my family today is happy that I am here. So, follow your heart. Continue your search, and thank you for allowing me to be a part of this congregation, Christ Community Church.

Thank you, Cindy. That was one story of eight or nine that we heard that night, and you can understand that there were tears and laughter, and I so wished that you could all be a part of that, because that is what being a community of faith is all about, a religious community, in our case, a Christian community, and on this day of Pentecost, I thought it would be good to share that with you.

Pentecost is a day when we recognize in the long tradition of the church, that our lives are touched by mystery. But, then that experience of grace needs to be tested, tested by experience and reason so that the experience of mystery results in a life of wholeness where we feel at home in the universe, where we feel at home in our own skin, where our experience resonates with that which we profess, or in Cindy's better words, where we can follow our heart. If there was a common theme that evening in all of those stories, it was this - that there was a deep intuition in all of those people who, incidentally, represented a broad spectrum of confessional groups, all coming from rather significant engagement in the church in its institutional form in one faith family or another. The common experience of all of them was that, somewhere along the line in the institutional expression, whether it be defining too narrowly what one must believe, or feeling threat at the expression of an alien thought, or being put off by the diversity that was reflective of the broad spectrum of human experience that was brought to the church, the common thread that evening was that all of these people in one way or another were serious in their quest, were yearning for that touch of mystery which they had known, but which then they so much wanted to bring to expression with a freedom that was reflective of their deepest insights, but always feeling that they were somehow or other hemmed in. And then they came here.

Today we had four people received at the 8:30 service, which just goes to show that even early in the morning people can be saved. It was marvelous. At 8:30 we generally are just trying to wake up for this service, but this morning Jim and Nancy Schmidt were there and they came in here last Christmas because their daughter was playing an instrument, so they wandered in to hear their daughter, and they encountered you. For the first time in their lives after a long struggle, as Cindy indicated, and some false starts, they said, "This is what we've been looking for, a community that honors diversity, a community that affirms our questions,

a community that is not marked by narrow definition and high walls of defensiveness, a community that doesn't claim to have a set of absolutes and in no sense believes it has spoken the last word, but rather is a community of people who take that engagement with the ultimate mystery seriously, who long for a deep and meaningful life in the spirit, but who also are able to think, to raise any question, and to be able to make adjustments in understanding as new knowledge comes to light and more experience is had." That is the kind of community you are, and that is the kind of community that those who have come in this time particularly bore witness to. I cannot do it as eloquently as Cindy did it, but as you sensed not only in her careful articulation, but the passion with which she spoke, that is Christ Community at its best.

As I was thinking about that, I was thinking about Peter's story and his encounter with Cornelius. It has so much good humor in it. He has a vision and then the knock on the door, and he is beckoned to come to the house of Cornelius who is a Roman centurion and therefore a Gentile, and with the epitome of social grace and civility, he looks at his host across the threshold and says, "You know, I'm not really supposed to be here. I'm not supposed to hang out with people like you. But, somehow or other, God has told me that I shouldn't consider anybody profane or unclean."

The word profane is very interesting. *Profane comes from the root that means outside the temple*, and so what Peter was really saying in this account of Luke is that God is trying to get through to me, to teach me that I shouldn't say of anybody, "They are outside the temple," or outside the compass of the grace or love of God. So, he comes in and says, scratching his head again, "By George, I guess God is no respecter of persons; God shows no partiality, but apparently, in every nation those who fear God and do God's will are accepted by God." Well, by God, that's quite an insight. Everything that Peter had been traditioned to believe and act upon to that point in his life was now being challenged by the concrete experience that he was having, which he believed was at the beckoning of the Holy Spirit. And so he is in this dilemma. What does he do? Does he honor the tradition which assured him that the God of Israel was God alone, the God of the Creator of heaven and earth?

Or, at this point, did he have to expand his vision? Did he have to sense that maybe the barriers that had made this peculiar people, this special people, given them a very strong sense of identity as the purveyors of this marvelous knowledge and understanding of God, did he have to at this point see that those barriers were being taken down and that now there was the universalizing possibility?

I never know how I feel about the fact that the Christian Church finally broke with its Jewish mother. I wish there had not had to be a break, because why do we need to birth another world religion? And yet, on the other hand, I know that through the Christian Church the God of Israel has been brought to the nations and we still have the distinctive witness of the Jewish people and the world would

certainly be a poorer place without the presence of the Jewish people. And so it is in the ongoing story of history, we have this experience that cannot be denied which denies the presuppositions on which our faith structure has been founded.

Peter, at that point, if he had any doubt, is given convincing proof, for he begins to tell the story of Jesus, and as he does so, what happens? The Holy Spirit falls on the crowd and he experiences the same thing that happens in the portals of the temple of Jerusalem among his own Jewish brothers and sisters. Now don't get any ideas, I want decorum this morning. I don't want any dancing in the aisles, I don't want too many amens. But, what happened is that the Holy Spirit fell on the crowd and they broke loose. There was this ecstatic experience. There was this experience of God, this ultimate mystery breaks through and touches concretely the lives of people who cannot contain themselves, and Peter says, "Wow! That's the same thing that happened to us." Thank God at that point that Peter was able to yield to the movement of the spirit of God. If you go on into chapter eleven, the first couple of verses, you will find that the General Synod of the..., no I mean the Jewish leaders gathered and they were put off and they criticized Peter. Peter said, "All I can do is tell you my story." And then thank God, because there is salvation even for the Church, they delighted in the fact that obviously God was doing something now on a global dimension.

Peter's theology was inductive theology and inductive theology is good theology. Its opposite is deductive theology. Deductive theology is when you know the answer before you encounter the question. You have a kind of a propositional truth that has to be absolutely true, and then you take that propositional truth that has to be true and you go to concrete experience, and you force your concrete experience into conformity with that dogmatic statement, that absolute. Deductive theology is a well thought out system that acts as a template that you impress on human experience, so that because of that template of dogmatic system, you can now know what is possible in terms of real human experience. That is the way the Church always tends because, once we get it put together, we really don't like it messed up again. But, as a matter of fact, if we would be true to what we see in the pattern of the Book of Acts, there was inductive theology. There was experience that tested the faith structure, and the experience altered, modified the faith structure, so that the faith structure was never absolutely stated. It was always in process; it was always tentative; it was always provisional, and tomorrow another experience causes me to "tweak" that understanding, so that there is this constant openness to new experience.

We are dealing with the touch of that ultimate mystery. After all, down deep, don't we want some moment of the experience of that which is ultimate? Of course we do. I speak of mystery, mystery not like something we will solve down the line as we get a little bit smarter, but mystery as that which transcends human capacity to know. But, then that mystery breaks through and I am touched in a thousand different ways, in a hundred different settings, and in those moments when I know I didn't create myself, I am born and I will die, I love another and

that love relationship will be broken by death, and what does it all mean and where is it all tending and is this all there is? Those are questions for which there is not an easy answer, and to be human is to be in the stream of history, and to be in the stream of history is to be in the position of continuing, ongoing experience. History is open-ended. Our lives are open-ended. The very mark of being human is that there is an open end to it, so, on that open-ended pilgrimage and journey I am constantly experiencing new things.

In his mighty dogmatic volumes, Karl Barth wrote in the preface of one after having written probably 6000 pages already, "Some people accuse me of changing. I'm not changing, but the landscape is different." Of course. And so, I don't come to my human experience already knowing. I come to my human experience with a touch of that ultimate mystery. I come into that human experience with my story. And all of that gives me eyes with which I encounter my experience, but my experience, in turn, loops back on my story and enables me to see things that I never saw before. And so, to be human in the stream of history is to have a sense of the ultimate mystery of things and to come to continually new opportunities and experiences and possibilities, so that we honor diversity, we leave no answer closed and final. We affirm the questions, and together we enjoy the journey, and together we support one another in the community of love and care as we live before the ultimate mystery and the questions that are beyond our fathoming. That is the joy of the community of grace, and as I said, if there was one thing that marked those who have come in this time, it was that relief. I can experience. I can question. I can wonder, and all the time in the deep, deep intuitive sense of being embraced by grace because I *am* embraced by grace in the body that is the body of grace, the body of Christ which is enlivened by the breath of God, the Spirit of God.

When I came back from Florida, I was all excited about having read the first volume of Gary Dorrien's *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, and as I read that story, the first volume dealing with the 19th century, I was so dumb-founded, because what I read there as the history that had developed in the American experience of the liberal church, I had lived through myself every inch of it, and as I quipped at the time, I wish somebody had told me. It wouldn't have been as tough to get through. But, as Cindy said, getting through is all part of that process. But, when you have really slugged your way through, when you have been swimming through asphalt, when you have sometimes been afraid and sometimes been hurt, then to be immersed in grace, to be set free - Ah! The joy of it. And so, I find it so remarkable. Here we are a community of grace, that is in some measure the consequence of some leadership that I have given theologically, who grew up thinking that liberal was a dirty word.

Gary Dorrien's thesis is that what has marked the liberal tradition is the refusal of an external authority, and the insistence that that authority, be it church or liturgy or text, be tested by reason and experience, so that we are not locked into a box but, as our experience grows and our knowledge grows, the faith story

continues to be understood in the light of all that continues to come to light. That is such a freeing, exhilarating experience. That is the liberal tradition. That is the open tradition. That is the gracious tradition. There is nothing to defend, nothing to fear, just the joy of the journey. Touched by the mystery, continually tested by experience and reason. That is the beautiful, simple story of the child of God. Happy Pentecost.

References:

Gary Dorrien. *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900, Vol. I.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.