

“Connecting Beyond Ourselves”

Pentecost, May 31, 2009

Rev. Don Childers, Los Alamos, John 15:26-16:15

Welcome to this Pentecost Sunday! Pentecost is celebrated as the “birth-day” of the Church. Our color is “red” signifying the flames of tongues that descended on the disciples on that day.

This week I read a article with the lead, **“New Study on Violence in Churches Reveals Struggling Economy Leading Cause of Attacks on Houses of Worship and Clergy.”** The title itself increased my anxiety. The study commented that **“despite advances in technology and security procedure, most places of worship are ill equipped to handle even the smallest act of violence.”**¹

¹ Reuters, “New Study on Violence in Churches Reveals Struggling Economy Leading Cause of Attacks on Houses of Worship and Clergy”, by Steve Honig, Market Wire, 2009.

The report compiled by SCG International reported that during economic downturns people become angry at God and direct that anger at churches and clergy. The study warned that this kind of violence is unlike a robbery in that death usually ensues. The reference point of the article was the recent attack on a Baptist Church in Illinois where the pastor was killed and a 2008 incident when a man opened fire on a Knoxville Tennessee Church during a children's play killing two people and injuring six others.

Do we have something to be anxious about? I will talk more about this later.

-1-

Let us turn to Pentecost. Only Luke has a reference to the Holy Spirit coming on the day of Pentecost. It is the text in the second chapter of Acts that forms the basis of our celebration. For Luke the Holy Spirit empowered the

disciples to engage in the mission they had been called to do. Prior to that the disciples waited and hid. With the experience of the Spirit on Pentecost the disciples were embolden to go forth and proclaim the “good news” of Jesus Christ. Furthermore a sub-theme in Luke is that the Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to reach across cultural and linguistic barriers to communicate the gospel to everyone.

In Luke and later in Paul’s writings the Greek word that we translate “spirit” is the word “*pneuma*”. The “*Hagios Pneuma*” or “*Holy Spirit*” comes from a Greek word that can mean: a life giving spirit, a human soul that has left the body; a spirit that is higher than humans but lower than God; a reference to the spirit of Jesus; or the movement of air. This word “*pneuma*” is used by Paul in Galatians 5: 22-25 when he describes the “fruits of the

Spirit” and in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 when Paul describes the “gifts of the Spirit”.

In John the Holy Spirit is referred to with a different word that is normally translated with the English word “advocate”. The word used in both the 14th and 15th chapters of John is the Greek word “*paraclete*”. That word refers to one who pleads a cause before a judge, the counsel for the defense, one who pleads a cause, or one who is a helper, assistant, or aide.

An obvious question is why here in our text does John choose a different word to describe the Holy Spirit? Furthermore why does John choose a word that comes out of the legal profession? What is John attempting to convey to the church through the choice of that word, “*paraclete*”?

John was well aware that as Christians we would at times be thrust into situations where fear and anxiety could take over. Indeed many Christians had already faced such times prior to John's Gospel. In the 60's Emperor Nero falsely blamed Christians for a devastating fire in Rome. Most scholars believe that Nero had the fire set or chose to ignore it and allow it to burn. His motive was to clear out that area of Rome to make way for some building projects he championed.

However, the plan backfired on Nero. Politically his non-action outraged people even creating a phrase that is still with us today, "*Nero fiddled while Rome burned.*" So, looking for a scapegoat to get the heat off of him, Nero blamed the Christians. Christians were arrested and

under torture confessed to the crime. Hundreds were executed including as scholars believe Peter and Paul.

For John's time and for all time there are occasions when we find ourselves having to defend our faith or finding ourselves in very anxious times or conditions. John reminds us that the Holy Spirit will be our advocate in such times. The Holy Spirit will lead us to have a "non-anxious" presence in the face of turmoil.

-3-

The model of a non-anxious presence was Jesus. Much of his teaching talked about being calm in the midst of a storm or being centered in God when the world was fracturing around us. Jesus would even say that there would be times when our very lives would be threatened because of our faith.

When Jesus was before Pilate he presented a non-anxious presence. The scene depicted is of a raging, powerful, magistrate completely frustrated by Jesus' calm silence. What authorities wanted was for Jesus to react in anger, to curse Rome or the Jewish leaders and to give them a reason for what they were doing. He did none of this and his silence, his forgiveness from the cross, and his spirit is a non-anxious presence that we strive to emulate.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who lived in the middle of the Twentieth Century. He was among the few German Christians who did not support the Nazi movement. He was loyal to Germany but he believed that the Nazi philosophy and practice was contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He was finally arrested and imprisoned. Then in 1945 Bonhoeffer was executed for his opposition to Hitler.

Later, Allied prisoners held at the same prison would comment on Bonhoeffer's deep faith and calmness especially on the day of his execution. On the day of his execution he led a communion service for the other prisoners. His demeanor was of a person of confident faith---a non-anxious presence in the middle of a raging storm.

-4-

Fear and anxiousness is counter to the life in the spirit. Such fear can lead to an abandonment of principles and values and to working counter to the purposes of God. Time and time again fear has driven the church to move to the dark side.

Carla Gardina Pestana in a 2004 book ² details the story of the conviction of three Quakers and the execution

² Pestana, Carla Gardina, Quakers and Baptists in Colonial Massachusetts. (Cambridge, 2004)

of two of them in colonial Massachusetts. Their crime was that according to the law of the Puritans Quakers were “destructive to the fundamentals of religion.” Their crime was being a Quaker.

In 1659, Robinson, Stephenson and Mary Dyer were convicted and sentenced to death for their Quaker beliefs. Military preparations were made fearing that other Quakers were going to attack the colony. The magistrates did what we would today call a “media blitz” to let people know of the impending danger. Pamphlets were printed and distributed demonstrating the imminent danger Quakers presented to the colony.

On the day of execution some 64 heavily armed escorts led the prisoners to the execution point and hecklers taunted all three during the execution. Mary Dyer was reprieved at the last moment but forced to stand, noose

around her neck, and watch her fellow Quakers be hung and slowly die. She was then banned from the colony with a warrant for death should she return.

In retrospect this act stands as a dark moment in the history of Massachusetts and in the history of the church in America. It was caused by runaway fear, misunderstanding and misinformation. Ironically Quakers were pacifists and there was no danger of an attack. The anxiety of the colony led them to rash and un-Christian action.

-5-

A non-anxious presence in the face of turmoil is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul refers to the “Fruit of the Spirit” as having love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Listen again to these words:

Self-control, patience, peace, gentleness. Think of those times when we or the church or our nation have acted otherwise---have lost self-control---and have no patience. When this happens peace and gentleness disappear. Enemies become faceless and inhuman and we give ourselves permission to put aside values and decency.

Generosity, joy, faithfulness. Think of the anxiety many are feeling in these difficult economic times. Such times can cause us to pull in, to be less generous and to not trust that God is powerful enough to support us in these times.

Love, gentleness, patience, kindness are attributes of the Holy Spirit that create a non-anxious presence in the face of trying times.

How do we gain this spirit? The answer we already know. It is gained through faith, prayer, community, and

commitment. There is no magic to the Holy Spirit. We gain the spirit through Christ but we access the spirit through prayer, faithfulness, community, and commitment. In these times, of all times, we need to SEEK THE HOLY SPIRIT.

-6-

Back to the article on the danger churches might face in such economic times as these times. We should not minimize the risk but I found the article a little self-serving. I did a Google search on the company that did the study. SCG International is an international company that specialized in security. They have provided security, logistics, and training for the CIA, for major corporations, for the FBI and other companies. I wonder if they were looking for a new market and taking advantage of two tragic incidents in the last two years?

Furthermore I read other articles about church and these economic times that took an opposite approach. These articles from a variety of sources pointed out that during such times people often TURN to God and the Church. Several articles talked about seeing the opportunity in these trying times of reaching out to hurting persons. My experience has been that in trying economic times rather than being angry at God people are more open to seeking God.

There is always a danger from within and outside the church. There is always a risk. Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will be our advocate and give to us the courage, the wisdom and the presence to be a faithful witness in each age. Happy Pentecost Sunday!!!