

"Pentecost Possibilities"

The first book of the Bible, Genesis, tells us (in Chapter 11), that people once tried to build a tower high enough to reach God's heights...They wanted to take over God's place. So God confused their language, and they could accomplish nothing... Thus the Tower of Babel signifies babbling confusion and lack of understanding among peoples. Unfortunately, there is much evidence in the world that this aspect of Babel is alive and well today.

Today is Pentecost. It is the celebration of the time when Jesus' promise, "I will not leave you desolate. I will send you a Comforter, even the Spirit of truth..." (John 14), was fulfilled. The Spirit of God came upon the gathered followers of Jesus, some 50 days after his resurrection, and filled them with power and conviction as to Jesus' identity and their calling to spread the news to all the people of the world... *The church was born as the breath of God was breathed into the lives of the people.* And the message of what God had done for humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus flowed from their lips in many languages, languages they did not themselves know, so that visitors to the city from all parts of the world could hear and understand the proclamation. On Pentecost the Spirit gave birth to the church, empowered its people, and enabled the people to speak of Jesus so clearly that the world could understand. Pentecost "undid" the Tower of Babel, as God's Spirit enabled communication and understanding.

Preacher Thomas Hall offered a neat "take" on Pentecost when he said: "The words that tumble out of their Jewish mouths are Arabic and Palestinian, Puerto Rican, Zulu, Albanian, rap, rock, and street language, theologically speaking. They are filled with the Spirit, and begin to speak about God, but in fresh, new languages. And so the story ends with a small group that suddenly mushrooms from a handful to a neighborhood full of Christians because God gives them new languages through which to communicate God's love." (DPS, on Internet)

How desperately we need the breath (in Hebrew, *Ruach*) of Pentecost today! Not just for the life of this or any particular congregation, but for larger reasons... Today churches struggle to proclaim a message of salvation understandable and relevant to our world. Something has gone wrong with our message... In many ways we have lost our articulation, our enthusiasm, even our sense of mission ... We need the clarity and life-giving power of Pentecost!

Today, many persons have decided that church does not have much to offer them. Dr. Edward Bauman once told about some Boy Scouts who were learning first aid. Three of them, who were to pretend they needed medical attention, were stationed along a trail. As they came to each of these, the others were to administer the necessary aid. The third scout was to pretend to have a severe cut with much bleeding. But the boys took so long in ministering to the first two that the third one got tired of waiting. When the other scouts arrived at the place where he had been stationed, they found a note that said, "I have bled to death and gone home."

Lots of former church members have decided that they have "bled to death," for whatever reason,

un-fed, uncared for, un-loved, angry... They have left and not returned to be part of the fellowship. (Edited from Clarence Cranford in *Cups of Light*)

Can these bones live? Can they offer life to others? Can God breathe life into us? (Pause)
A man told of the birth of his first child, and how dusky and silent the baby was immediately after delivery; it was not breathing. A nurse quickly took the baby and suctioned its airways. As soon as it took a breath, life won, and the baby was healthy. The breath of life made the difference. God's breath/Spirit for us makes all the difference.

Years ago in a seminary missions class, Herbert Jackson told how, as a new missionary, he was assigned a car that would not start without a push. After pondering his problem, he devised a plan. He went to the school near his home, got permission to take some children out of class, and had them push his car off. As he made his rounds, he would either park on a hill or leave the engine running. He used this ingenious procedure for two years. Ill health forced the Jackson family to leave, and a new missionary came to that station.

When Jackson proudly began to explain his arrangement for getting the car started, the new man began looking under the hood. Before the explanation was complete, the new missionary interrupted, "Why, Dr. Jackson, I believe the only trouble is this loose cable." He gave the cable a twist, stepped into the car, pushed the switch, and to Jackson's astonishment, the engine roared to life. For two years needless trouble had become routine. The power was there all the time. Only a loose connection kept Jackson from putting that power to work. (Herbert Jackson, on numerous Internet sites)

Can these bones live? Are we connected? Do we even *expect* that God will do anything in our church or our lives? Fortunately, God knows all about emptiness and bringing forth life and power where they don't seem possible. The dry bones came to life in Ezekiel's vision. Dried-up lives today can be filled with meaning and mission. Don't overlook what happened in Ezekiel's field of bones: It was God who breathed life into those bones. And it was God who enabled Ezekiel to even imagine such a vision! God!

That's what we're talking about at Pentecost: God. The God who poured out his love for the world in the life of Jesus also poured and continues to pour out his Spirit into the lives of those who would hear and believe today so as to provide them life and direction. The Spirit is God's activity in the world now... The Spirit clarifies for us the truth of Jesus' life and the depth of God's love. The Spirit nudges us to respond to God's love by loving others. The Spirit works in our hearts to help us change destructive patterns, to help us draw closer to God. The Spirit gives God's LIFE to a Christian and to God's church.

Our world seems only too full of bad news and negative attitudes. It's easy to feel dried up and rattled by life. Failed relationships, shootings everywhere, more casualties daily in Afghanistan, joblessness, collapsed buildings, tornadoes, illness, the challenge of advancing age, tragedies on the highway, corruption high and low; the list is long. Each of us finally asks one basic question: Is God really involved in my life today? If we choose to answer no, we might as well go back to

bed, cover our heads, close our churches, and hope to die painlessly. If we answer yes, then we may take a deep breath and *let God's life in!* God can provide life and possibility where we see none, which means we can step forward in life filled with hope and expectation instead of fear and discouragement. With God's Spirit pulsing through a life, there is no telling what will come up, what will happen. (pause)

I want to share with you a personal story that for me shows God working in wonderful, unexpected ways in the lives of two families. Woody and I were living in New Haven, about 1982. It was an extremely hot and very dry Sunday in July, and Woody and I had just preached in each other's churches. My topic had been compassion. Just as I drove into the driveway of our house, I saw a dog, bedraggled, drifting in a lost manner across our yard. I could see that it was thin, and that its coat was quite matted. I knew that on such a parched day it had to be thirsty. I got out of my car and tried to approach the animal, but it barked at me and shied away. So I went inside and brought out a bowl of water, which I set down; then I went back inside. Peering out through a window, I watched the dog eagerly lap up all the water I had put down. I repeated the action, and this time took some dry dog food out as well. (pause) That's how we found "Samantha," as somebody named her. We already had two dogs and two cats, but we kept her while we tried to find first her owner, and then tried to find *anybody* who would take her.

The dog slowly came to trust us. At first if we made sudden moves or raised our voices, she would cower, leading us to believe that she'd had a hard life. But she settled down and actually started to fit into our household very well. We put ads in the papers, we hung up notices. No takers. Briefly someone took her, but they brought her back to us. In August we were going on vacation, and I was lining up a guest preachers for my church. The preacher was Dr. Richard Hays, who was then a professor of New Testament at Yale Divinity School. I had met him through some of our clergy meetings, and he readily agreed to preach for me. While I was talking with him on the telephone, I almost habitually asked him, "Richard, you don't happen to know anyone who wants a dog, do you?" There was a long silence. Then Richard replied, "It's very strange that you ask. My son and I have just begun praying for a dog. You see, we acquired a puppy a few months ago, and it became ill and died. It hurt my son terribly. So we have decided that we will try an adult dog." I couldn't believe what I was hearing! And to this day I cannot tell you how beautifully things worked out.

The Hays provided Samantha (they renamed her Smokey) with a wonderful home. God provided them with a gentle, spirited dog who remained a blessing for them all for years to come. And there was a surprise! Unbeknown to us or the Hays family, "Smokey" was pregnant, and shortly after they took possession of her, she gave birth to ten healthy puppies. The whole experience - even the puppies - was received by the Hays as God's gift, the work of the Holy Spirit in a small way to communicate tremendous love to a young boy and a needy dog. And a few other people along the way! Hope and expectation; life! Something God alone can see. Sinews and flesh on those bones...

Every time the church year rolls around to Pentecost I pray for re-birth. On the first Christian

Pentecost the disciples were filled with God's breath and re-made by the Spirit of the Creator into certain, faith-filled, effective proclaimers of Jesus as the Christ, Lord and Savior. Before this they had stumbled at just about every step, misunderstanding what Jesus was doing, arguing among themselves, denying and deserting Jesus, being ruled by fear. But on Pentecost, God breathed life into fragile folks and formed a new creation, the church of Jesus speaking so clearly and powerfully that people were able to understand. God did it once, and God has continued to "LIFE" the church ever since.

In the almost year I have been with you at WUMC, the question, "Can these bones live?" has challenged my heart repeatedly. The Conference powers think that we should sell the building and rent a storefront, and see if we can be a church without the huge financial burden of this building. In many ways this makes sense, especially when we review our income versus our expenses. On top of that, many of our most faithful members and the ones who have been able to support the church financially are close to 90 years old. So in some ways we are like "dry bones" as we struggle to offer the food pantry and thrift shop and other ministries of this church. Can these bones live? *Does* God want to fill us with renewed life right here in this building? Can God use us as we are, or is God asking us to make changes? I don't know. Only God knows...YOU, Lord, know. Only God knows what is possible here. Only God can open us to whatever new things God wants to bring forth among us. More than ever, we need the leading of God's Spirit, to show us how to faithfully use the blessings we have been given, how to reach out to our community, and how to live our lives. If you hear nothing else today, hear this: God can breathe life into each of us and all of us, if we will but ask it and allow it. God can show us what possibilities God sees for us and what work God wants us to carry out.

All we have to do is ask and listen. A simple cry is enough: "O God, I need you. I cannot live by my own power. I am thirsty for Life." We who have been rattled by life may then listen for the rattle of the dry bones as God does something new with us!

On this Pentecost day, may each of us find the dry bones of our faith and life-walk moved to rattle with the new possibilities God will show us. In small ways that reveal large love, may God's Spirit move among and through us, to fill us, feed us, and lead us forward, as followers and effective proclaimers of Jesus Christ, that others may not bleed to death, but find LIFE and HOPE through their Lord and Savior. In Jesus' name. Amen.