

Sermon June 8, 2014 “Respiratory Therapy” Pentecost Acts 2:1-21 Galatians 5:16-26

Galatians 5:22 – “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

Last week we heard through Dr. Luke in both the Gospel of Luke and Luke’s second letter, the Book of Acts, how Jesus, right before he was taken up into heaven, instructed his followers to go back into Jerusalem and wait for God to send the power of his Holy Spirit upon them, so that then they could be his witnesses to EVERYBODY throughout the world.

This week at the Annual Conference of our New York Methodists our Bishop, Martin McLee, was ill and thus unable to attend. In his place three other bishops came to provide leadership, but for me the huge blessing was that the scheduled speaker for Wednesday night also provided the sermon for Thursday night’s service, since the Bishop was not available. The speaker was The Rev. Dr. Zan Holmes, a retired pastor/professor of preaching from Texas. For his second sermon, Dr. Holmes has some things to say about Pentecost that I found to be wonderful! So I will try to share some of them with you now.

Holmes suggested that the earliest followers of Jesus were given a “Pentecost Task” by him, to wait in Jerusalem for power, so that they then could witness to everybody. Everybody would include the despised half-breeds in Samaria, the Jews who had reviled and crucified Jesus, the Romans who made life so tough for those living in Judea and lots of other places... God would give them power so they could be boldly about the witnessing task Jesus was placing before them.

Holmes talked a little about this, saying, “Too often churches year for power but do nothing with what they have now! ‘If we just had more people, or more money, or a better building, or whatever...’ But what are you doing with the little church you have now?” What are we doing with the variety of gifts our Lord has already given us?

Jerusalem. Jesus told his followers to head back to Jerusalem and there to wait for God’s Holy Spirit to empower them. Holmes reminded us that Jerusalem - for every one of Jesus’s followers - was the place where they had failed Jesus. As he had given them the last supper in the Upper Room, trying to let them know that he would suffer and die, they had argued among themselves about who was the best disciple. As Jesus agonized over what lay ahead of him and asked his friends to stay awake with him, they fell asleep and let him down. It was in Jerusalem as Jesus was beaten and grilled by the authorities that Peter three times denied even knowing Jesus. Nobody stood up for him or stood by him. They all had failed him in Jerusalem.

Holmes imagined how the disciples might have wanted to say, “Hey, Jesus, don’t make us go back to Jerusalem! Let us go to Bethany, where the Palm parade took place, or somewhere we did well, where we didn’t mess up so badly; not Jerusalem.” But Jesus told them to go into

Jerusalem, the place where they had failed so miserably and lost their direction...Go there, where you feel the most broken, the least powerful, where you just don't see a way forward, and wait to find out what God can do with you and your situation. Which brings us to today.

The Holy Spirit is how the church breathes; it is how God gives us life and direction as Jesus' followers. It is God right in our midst, nudging us to see what Jesus would do in a given situation, helping us notice the needs of another person, making us bold in our ability to share the love of God with someone else... The Holy Spirit is God's breath of life as it flows into our living. ...Has anybody here ever experienced asthma or bronchitis? Well, you know firsthand how desperately people need oxygen, and you know how hard it is for a congregation or an individual Christian to really live without the Holy Spirit: everything wears you out, it's uphill, it pulls you down and ends up defeating you.

At Pentecost – and any time we become open to the respiratory therapy of God's Holy Spirit - the Spirit breathes life and hope and power into folks so that we can live as followers of Jesus Christ. Without the Holy Spirit, it's like trying to drive a car without any gas or with a broken transmission... It gets pretty heavy as we try to push it up the hills.

The thing about the Holy Spirit is: we can ask for it and wait for it, but we cannot demand or direct it. We may cry out to God to send God's Holy Spirit as an attempt to settle our own agenda. Send your Spirit here now, God, cure my illness, my despair, my unhappiness, my poverty. Fill me with a nice sense of peace, so I can relax and enjoy life. Do this, God, do that... Fill our church, Lord, so we can feel good about it again, like we did in the fifties. Fix our roof. Do this, God, do that..." We almost demand these things before we'll even acknowledge that God's Spirit is alive and well.

But God's ways may be different from what we are seeking. God may very well be calling to us: "My children, be my instruments so that I can fill this world with my love. You may not have a full church, but you do have the many gifts I have already given you. Use my gifts in faith to respond to the needs around you. Be my witnesses even in the midst of your own uncertainties."

The rest of this sermon is comprised of a few illustrations. One is short and sharp, challenging those of us who say we are Christian to do more than just try to make ourselves feel better about life when we come to church. Another is the story of one young man's life that became a ministry.

The first two come from Tony Campolo's book, *Let Me Tell You A Story*. The first: "In a make-believe story set in an American city during World War II, a program was organized to train volunteers in the skills of emergency first aid. There was a fear that if the city should be bombed there would not be adequate medical care available for the people who would be wounded. There was one woman in the class who seemed bored and detached from all that was being taught. She was there out of a sense of obligation but had no enthusiasm for

learning.

“One day, the particular woman showed up at the first-aid class full of enthusiasm. She could hardly contain herself as she told the others in the class the source of her newfound excitement about the course. She said, ‘This class never meant much to me until yesterday! Yesterday, I was sitting on my front porch when there was a horrendous automobile accident right in front of my house. The cars not only smashed into each other head-on, there were bodies thrown through the air! Everywhere there were people who were seriously injured, with blood everywhere. The scene was horrible. It was so horrible I almost fainted. Then I remembered what I had learned in this class – and I put my head between my legs and didn’t pass out!’”

The woman just didn’t get it. She was not supposed to learn first-aid simply to take care of herself, but to be equipped to help others. It’s easy to shake our heads at her self-centeredness and blindness. But too often we’re not so different when it comes to our calling as Christians. It may not have sunk in that the reason we have been given the Christian faith is not just so that we can handle the stresses and strains of our own personal lives, but so that we can be aware of and empowered to reach out to others in our neighborhoods, places of work, and even throughout the world who need help; so that we can be *witnesses* to Jesus alive and with us in this world NOW.

The second story is about a young man who found a way for his life to be a ministry. “One Friday a young professor of English literature at a state university walked into the academic dean’s office and announced that he would not be back on Monday to teach. He was quitting. The dean warned him that if he walked out on them on such short notice he would never teach again. The young professor simply shrugged his shoulders and said, “I understand. That’s okay.”

The young professor’s mother, alarmed by the situation, called Tony Campolo and asked him to go and speak with her son. She was worried, since there was little else to do with a Ph.D. in English literature but to teach. So Tony did go to see him.

The young man looked at Tony and said, “I quit. That’s all there is to it. I couldn’t stand it anymore. Every time I walked into that classroom, I died a little bit more.”

Campolo wrote: “I understood what he was talking about because I, myself, was a college teacher at the time. I knew what it was like to walk into a classroom and pour your heart out trying to communicate some profound truth, some immense pain, and then have some student in the last row raise a hand and ask, ‘Do we have to know this for the final?’ It does make a teacher die a little bit.”

Campolo continued: “After a while I realized that there was no way to dissuade the young man from his decision. So I asked him how he was going to earn a living now...”

His answer: 'I'm a mail carrier.' I responded: 'A Ph.D. mail carrier? Now that's something!'

He laughed and said, "There really aren't too many of us out there.....In truth, I'm not such a good one...Everybody else in my post office gets the mail delivered by 2:30 or three at the latest. I never get it delivered until about five!'

'What takes you so long?' I inquired.

'I visit,' he said. 'You cannot imagine how many people on my route never got visited until I became the mailman. There are interesting people on my route who are interested in literature. There are hurting people who need the comfort that comes from the great poets. There are people who read and want to share what they've learned. I can't go to sleep at night because of all the cups of coffee I share during the day!'"

Campolo continued, "I wasn't surprised when I found out the following year that the people on this man's mail route had gotten together and thrown a surprise birthday party for him at the local American Legion hall. He was special to them, and they were special to him. His mail route had become a mission field." (*Let Me Tell You A Story*)

If you hear nothing else today, hear this: At any moment, God can use any one of us to give hope and blessing to someone else. Every person willing to follow Jesus Christ can be led by the Holy Spirit into some sort of ministry. This can happen at school, at work, in the grocery store, on the street. God may call you to go to South Sudan or ask you to walk next door. God knows what gifts and strengths have been given you, even those you have not yet recognized; and the Holy Spirit is like the water and sun provided to bring forth growth from seeds....

Now, a final illustration: A preacher told of working on a sermon on the Holy Spirit. He kept reading: "The wind bloweth where it listeth." For the life of him he could not understand what that meant. *The wind bloweth where it listeth*. So finally he went down to a wharf and just walked around and looked at the sea. He met an old sailor who had spent his whole life on the sea. The preacher said, "Do you know anything about the wind?" The old man shook his head. "No." The preacher continued, "Do you mean to tell me you have spent your whole life sailing ships and you don't know anything about the wind?" The old sailor said, "I know nothing about the wind. But whenever it begins to blow, I hoist the sail, and it carries me back to port. That's all I know." And so the preacher had his sermon. The wind of God blows into the sails of our lives and finally leads us safe into the harbor." -- (Winston Pearce, *I Believe* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1954), pp. 36-37 - *shared by Lovette, The Immediate Word*)

May God's Holy Spirit fill our hearts, guide our impulses, and breathe his power into us so that we can be filled with power to be the church, witnesses to the love and hope of Jesus Christ, however God would have us be the church; in Christ's name and to his glory! Amen.

