

Pentecost Sunday

May 24, 2015

"SIGNS OF THE SPIRIT"

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 2:1-21

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

I got letter this week from the "Common Sense - Use It" campaign out of Pompano Beach, Florida. They print t-shirts with the words "Common Sense - Use It" emblazoned across the front. They believe if they can get enough of these t-shirts out they will trigger the "subconscious" of everyone in our nation who sees it to increase the use of common sense in decision making. For good measure, they put "I Believe" on the back, which (they said) will lead people to think of whatever they believe and encourage them to believe in it.

They wanted to know how many of these I might want to order at \$20 apiece for our congregation. Well, I have more common sense than to bite at this obvious marketing gimmick. I have no idea who these people are, but I get a mental picture of two guys sitting on the beach in Florida waiting for the orders to come pouring in ... at an \$18 profit per shirt ... and dreaming of condos and yachts.

Maybe they're on to something. I remember when the whole designer label/bumper sticker/message on t-shirts phenomenon began. I was in college, and suddenly, you were nobody unless you had the Nike check on your hat or the Izod alligator on your shirt or the Polo pony on your pocket. John Biggs was the poster boy of this era. The designers "du jour" change on a whim, but every store has turned us into human billboards advertising their products and paying *them* for the privilege. And it wasn't long before somebody saw the profit to be gained from exploiting people's faith, too ... so we saw Christian designer jeans with "Jesus" stitched on the back pocket and diamond WWJD bracelets and oh, so much more. It seems that even Christians are fooled into forgetting it's not what you wear on the outside that signifies your character ... but who you are on the inside.

Today is Pentecost in the church and we heard again the powerful passage in Acts where the church was born. Pentecost was an ancient feast still celebrated by the Jews to this day ... a celebration of the spring harvest ... a celebration of when God gave the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai and made Israel a people. Acts tells us that Jews had gathered in Jerusalem from all nations. They were all Jews, but they spoke many languages ... and the power of the Spirit that day was to undo the story of the Tower of Babel. At Babel, human arrogance led to a confusion of languages. At Pentecost, the Spirit of God led all to understand the story of the Messiah in their own language. Acts preaches an inclusive gospel ... breaking down the walls of language and race and ethnicity from the very beginning. Well, it is a miracle if you can get all the people in one room to understand what you're saying and be unified before God, let alone when you have such a diversity of people.

The arrival of the Spirit shouldn't have been a big surprise to the apostles. In John 14:15-17 Jesus tells the disciples that he is going to the Father and promises to send the Holy Spirit to be with them forever. But after his crucifixion ... despite his promises ... the Risen Lord doesn't find his disciples confidently waiting for him to come and breathe on them and give them the gift of the Holy Spirit (20:22). Instead he finds them huddled together in a locked room for fear of their enemies (20:19). They aren't behaving like a group of people who have been promised the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

There is a reason for that. It's called selective hearing. John Biggs may be the poster boy for that too! Whenever Jesus talked in the gospel about sending the Spirit or the coming of the Spirit, it was in connection with his leaving to go with God. And as soon as the disciples heard Jesus mention his leaving, they closed their ears and did not hear the details of who was coming to be present in his physical absence. For us and for the disciples, it's possible to see someone's lips moving but not hear what they're actually saying because we are distracted by our inner pain. That's why Peter reproached Jesus (Mk 8:32) for predicting his own abuse and death. He stopped listening too soon, and missed the good news in the bad ... the joy in the sorrow. That's why Jesus' disciples in the synoptic gospels are surprised when the tomb is empty. They always stopped listening at "be killed" and missed hearing "and on the third day rise." We keep their habit alive whenever we are focused so intently on the painful aspects of our current life condition that we forget we've been promised the Spirit, and don't factor in its power and presence in our lives.

Jesus challenges the disciples for this habit in our gospel reading this morning. He chides them that ... because he has mentioned leaving ... "sorrow has filled their hearts." None of them has stopped to reflect that he's going to God and sending a gift back from God. None of them has paused to hear that "it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."

And true to his word ... there were tongues of fire and the sound of a mighty rushing wind, too, and those were amazing manifestations of the invisible God. But the real miracles of Pentecost we often miss ... because we think only of the external ... instead of recognizing the internal signs of the Spirit in the story. Even the church falls prey to putting image over substance, and is impressed by the religiosity of language. To this day parts of the church suggest that if you don't speak in tongues, God's Spirit isn't with you ... or that if you do, you must be a kook. Some of you may remember the emergence the controversial charismatic movement in the 1970's. For those of you who don't ... charismatics are known for their spontaneous responses in worship. This spontaneity did not always sit with traditionalists and the differences often split congregations in bitter fights. As tragic as those were splits were, I remember two jokes from that time. "Question: What is a charismatic? Answer: A charismatic is an appliance for slicing and dicing churches." It was balanced by another joke: "Question: What is a charismatophobia? Answer: Charismatophobia is the irrational fear of anything not printed in the bulletin." Perhaps both sides erred in emphasizing the external over the internal where it comes to signs of the Spirit.

What are the signs of the Spirit at Pentecost? One is the preaching of the gospel to all people. Another is the response that preaching gets. Another is the transformation of the people who respond and are never the same again. Another is the inclusion of such a diverse group of people

and their unity in a common experience of God's presence. Yet another is the birth of the church which follows when, we are told,

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).

What are the signs that the Spirit of God is here ... that the Spirit of Pentecost is the Spirit of the First Congregational United Church of Christ in Eagle River? It is not what we wear or whether or not we use the same Christian buzzwords. It's not in outward displays of emotion or ... on the other extreme, a tight and formal reserve. It's not the style of the music we sing or how big our Bibles are. It's what happens inside us when we gather for worship. It's what happens among us in our relationships. It's what happens as we take up the mission Christ gave us ... to preach the good news in word and deed ... to include all persons in our community of care in acts of mercy and kindness and justice.

The Holy Spirit is the invisible presence of the powerful Creator and Lover of the universe. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the risen Christ among us. We cannot see God with our eyes, but like the wind moving the trees we can see where God has been ... where God is working ... how God has changed people by loving them. People may show their response to God's presence in different ways which express as much as anything else, their own personality and style of expression. Some get noisy and some get quiet, and let's face it, some fake it to manipulate and exploit. But the true signs of the Spirit cannot be faked. They are seen in how the mission of the church is empowered to carry the love of God to all persons.

Then let us use our common sense. We don't need t-shirts or designer Jesus jeans or bracelets or bumper stickers to show we've got the Spirit. The Spirit shows in who we are becoming and what we are doing in the name of Christ. So let us rejoice in God's presence among us today and let the work of the Spirit continue among us because God has taken hold of us ... let us rejoice that every day is Pentecost as we love all kinds of people in the name of Jesus Christ.

May we pray?

Creating God, Loving Christ, Living Spirit, Move among us today like a gentle breeze that refreshes us. Move us like a gale that fills our sails and sends us forward in your mission. Move against us like a hurricane that knocks down the walls of resistance we build to defy your will. And let your Spirit be evident in the way lives are saved, lives are changed, lives are applied to your good news work in this place in the name of Christ, Amen.