

Pentecost Sunday
May 16, 2016

"Then and Now"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 2:1-21 ~ John 14:8-17 (25-27)

When I attended Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas I visited the Biblical Arts Center with a group of friends. I would like to say that I was trying to enrich my understanding of scripture through the visual arts, but truth be told, I knew that the rest of the day would include lunch and shopping, and nowhere on the planet is that done with more devotion than Dallas ... in Dallas, shopping is truly a religious experience. But I must admit that I was amazed by the size of the museum, and one couldn't help but be taken aback by the 124-by-20 foot oil painting by Torger Thompson entitled "Miracle at Pentecost." It was displayed every hour ... on the half hour ... accompanied by a light and music show. The painting depicted the Acts 2 version of Pentecost, complete with over two hundred biblical characters. Completed in 1969, it was the centerpiece of the museum until 2005 when the museum was gutted by a fire and the painting was destroyed. The museum has since reopened with new galleries and a new name: "The Museum of Biblical Art."

Perhaps a visual depiction of the Acts version perhaps called for a painting that was panoramic in size and scope ... for special lighting effects and sound. I vividly remember that as I sat in the theater seats, a spotlight lit up various people in the painting and a recorded narration recounted their stories. Though I was astounded by the painting and the panoramic presentation ... I was only a spectator ... beholding a long ago event ... dramatic, yet distant. And that is how I sometimes have felt in reading the Acts 2 version of the "miracle at Pentecost." John's more intimate introduction of the Holy Spirit occurs in John 20:19-23. Our text for this week from the 14th chapter of John is Jesus' promise that it is on its way.

Today's gospel text could be portrayed by a portrait rather than a panorama, and that portrait would feature two people, Jesus and Philip. It would depict this interchange, which comes near the beginning of what scholars call "The Last Discourse" (13:31-17:26) in John's gospel. Jesus has just told the disciples that "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on, you do know him and have seen him"(14:7). Philip seems to be demanding a literal sighting. "Show us the Father and we will be satisfied" (14:8).

Jesus chastises him with a rhetorical question. "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and still you do not know me?" Apparently Philip's answer to Jesus' question is "Yes." "Yes, you have been with me all this time and still I do not know you." Is it possible to be near someone for years and not be close to them? I would have to say yes, because I am embarrassed to admit that at times I have lived across the street from my neighbors, and I didn't know anything much about them beyond their names. I might put Christmas cookies on their front step with a card, but that is not really much of an effort. Clearly, proximity doesn't equal relationship.

I've often preached about the difficulty we sometimes have in appropriating the Good News of Easter. It occurs to me that the same could be said of the "Miracle at Pentecost" of Acts 2. It's dramatic to be sure ... but what does it have to do with us? Well, it might help us to remember that ... as with the good news of Easter ... not everybody "got it," and certainly not everybody "got it" right away.

If I were to paint a picture of Pentecost in John's Gospel, it *wouldn't* have to be 124-by-20 feet. But it might include several people who ... in "one on one" encounters with Jesus ... misunderstood his message and identity because they were operating on the literal level ... while Jesus was operating on the level of spiritual reality. My painting might be called "Misunderstanding of Pentecost."

Just like at the Biblical Arts Center I'd invite you to take your seat and the curtain would draw back and the painting would begin in darkness and then, one by one, the characters would light up.

There is Nicodemus who doesn't get how he is supposed to climb back into the womb when he is a grown man. "How can one be born after having grown old?"

There is the woman at the well who doesn't understand how she's supposed to get the living water of which Jesus spoke. "Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"

There is the man by the pool who thinks healing can come from bubbling water while the Healer stands right next to him. "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me."

There is Thomas, who in chapter 14 has just revealed a literal understanding of "the Way." "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus then tells him "I am the Way, the truth and the life."

And now the spotlight illuminates Philip as he takes his turn at misunderstanding. As he asks Jesus to show him the Father, while Jesus, in whom the Father dwells and through whom the Father works, is just beside him. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9).

We know the panoramic, pyrotechnic Pentecost that comes around every spring. But do we understand that there is also an internal Pentecost? According to our gospel text, Pentecost is on the way. "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

Yes, Pentecost comes with tongues of fire ... but before that ... it comes through the promise of Jesus, and the breath of the Risen Jesus. It doesn't wait for our 7:30 and 10:00 am services on May 15th. We yearn for new life like Nicodemus ... to slake our spiritual thirst like the woman at the well ... for healing like the man by the pool ... for guidance into an unknown and frightening future like Thomas ... and for the knowledge that God's promises are true like Philip.

Our texts point to an intimate Pentecost ... to the Holy Spirit at work in our inner lives and in our world ...drawing us into intimate relationship with God who delivers on all God's promises.

Pentecost didn't just happen once, a long, long time ago. There are, in Luke's Acts of the Apostle's, multiple Pentecosts ... multiple times, that is, when the Spirit is poured out ...when amazing things happen ... and people come to faith. Think about when Philip baptizes the Ethiopian Eunuch ... or Paul's conversion ... or Peter's "conversion" to a more universal understanding of Christianity in his encounter with Cornelius ... just to name a few. Each of these stories represents a repetition and extension of the power of the Holy Spirit that starts at Pentecost ... but continues throughout the history of the early church.

And it doesn't stop in Acts. There are a variety of episodes in the Church's history that we might also appropriately name another Pentecost. The flourishing of the monastic communities in the middle ages ... the Reformation ... the revivals of the first and second Great Awakenings in North America. And perhaps we'd make bold to name the heightened appreciation and hunger of the divine in our own age as a potential Pentecost in the making.

Pentecost isn't over! Why should we be surprised by that? In the gospel reading today, Jesus makes an astonishing promise to his disciples. He says that even if they have a hard time believing what he says based on his words alone, at least they can believe it because of the works they've seen him do. And then he goes on to say, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these."

Did you hear that? We who believe in Jesus will do even greater works than he! Feeding ... preaching ... healing ... giving life to the dead. Maybe the important question isn't, "did you hear that?", but rather, "do you believe it?" It seems too astounding ... too far-fetched ... too much beyond our knowledge or experience.

But sometimes ... aided by the Advocate ... that is also the Spirit that fell at that first Pentecost ... I do see it! I see the people I'm around continuing the story that started so long ago by sharing their faith ... living with confidence ... claiming the power of God in their lives ... reaching out in mercy and love to those around them, and more. I see it in you ... in this Church that continues to be created anew by the Spirit. And the thing is, the more I name this ... the more I see it...and the easier it gets to name...and then to see...and so on and so on.

But we must be careful to only count our "victories" as Pentecost events. It has been said that the greatest obstacle to *future* success is *past* success. From our failures and mistakes we can learn ... but our successes...well, our successes can fool us into thinking that what worked *then* must be what will work *always*. We standardize, systematize, codify. Like Peter on the mount of transfiguration, we try to build tents and stay there ... and when we are forced to come down from the mountain ...we spend years pining for what we left behind. The golden age always appears to be back there, back then ... and our past successes, our golden ages, all too often get in the way of God's new work before us.

Pentecost in Acts 2 was a success, a great one, in fact. But the later introduction of newcomers who were somehow different from the insiders created a problematic situation. Tensions began

to surface. Some newcomers, like Barnabas, somehow bridged the gap and were accepted into the group. Others, like the Hellenists in Acts 6, were not. These "newbies," these outsiders, were viewed with some suspicion. They had not been part of that golden age ... they didn't know the inside jokes ... they didn't fit in ... they were intruders, interlopers.

And yet, it is the newcomers ... then and now ... who often are most open to new possibilities ... even as the insiders long for times past. In Acts, following the success of Pentecost ... the apostles actually held back ... stayed in place ... did good work and built up their own community ... but always in the shadow of the temple ... always within the limits of their comfort zone. For the movement to grow beyond its Jewish sectarian roots, new leaders were needed ... and a new base established. In Antioch, "the queen of the east," believers from Jerusalem brought their message ... some only to Jews, but others ... usually recent newcomers themselves ... spoke to others also, to Hellenists and to outsiders ... proclaiming that salvation is for "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord."

Antioch was about to become the base for a new set of missionary endeavors that would reach beyond boundaries both ethnic and geographic. And the apostles sent out from that base would not be from among the original twelve ... but rather those former outsiders, Barnabas and Paul, who would serve as Christ's ambassadors and turn their world "upside down." It began with Pentecost, but it could not stop there. Because the good news is that the golden age is not sometime back then, whenever *then* was. No, the golden age is *now*, and *every now* yet to come. Indeed, it is the journey itself, as we encounter the living Christ again and again in new and unexpected ways ... in new and unexpected people that we meet along the way.

What, when, and where will our next Pentecost will be? Where might this community of faith yet again respond to God's call ... and empowered by the Holy Spirit ... when and where might we respond in faith to the summons issued by God through the needs of neighbor and community?

"Misunderstanding at Pentecost" can become "Miracle at Pentecost" without a big crowd and special effects. The change happens when we realize who is witnessing within us and who is standing beside us.

May we pray?

Almighty God, on this day you opened the way of eternal life to every race and nation by the promised gift of your Holy Spirit: Shed abroad this gift throughout the world by the preaching of the Gospel, that it may reach to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.