

Pentecost

by Michael K. Turner

May 31, 2009

Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34,
35b; Romans 8:22-27;
John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

The disciples were frustrated, frightened, and completely flabbergasted regarding their next move. Jesus, had been arrested and put to death weeks earlier as a suspected political usurper of Rome. Subsequently, he had returned from the dead and appeared to the disciples instructing them to wait. So, the disciples gathered behind closed doors and waited. But, as they waited, their anxiety grew. Would they be arrested too? How would they continue Christ's mission without his direct instruction? What was next?

Outside of the closed door a great festival was going on. It had been fifty days since Pass-over had concluded, and the Festival of Weeks was now being celebrated. People had come to Jerusalem from as far away as Egypt and Phrygia for the Festival. Jews were instructed to suspend all daily work and to gather for worship. Outside were the sounds of devotion and even merriment, but the anxious disciples could partake in none of those emotions.

Just as the disciples had reached the pinnacle of despair, they heard a sound of a rushing wind. In an instant, the wind filled the house. The Holy Spirit had come among them. And, in an instant, the disciples were rejuvenated. They took to the streets and shared the Good News of Jesus Christ with the crowds. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that the Holy Spirit allowed the message of the disciples to be understood by all people, as if the words were spoken in their native tongues.

This story is powerful one. Modern Christians

are often a little timid about talking about the Holy Spirit. Afraid of being labeled "charismatic", many believers deemphasize the Holy Spirit's role in the Christian journey. The story of Pentecost, however, is not meant to simply remain in the past. Instead, it serves as a joyful reminder that the Christian journey is not a solitary one. God's Spirit is constantly at work in our lives. When we, like the disciples in this story, are stressed out, beat-up, and feeling defeated, we need to learn to open ourselves to God's Spirit.

Textually, this story serves as a reversal of the story of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). In that etymological tale, the ambition and arrogance of human beings leads to division of languages and people. In the account from Acts, the people and their languages are reunited through the power of God. These stories taken in tandem serve to remind us that we cannot be so presumptuous or arrogant as to hope to bring about the Kingdom of God by ourselves. Instead, we must recognize we need the empowerment, direction, and courage that the Spirit provides.

June 7, 2009

Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29, Romans 8:12-17;
John 3:1-17

The phrase "born again" has taken on a very specific connotation in contemporary society, generally indicating a distinct, emotional conversion experience when a person accepts Jesus into their lives as a personal, spiritual savior. Today's passage from the Gospel of John adds new dimension to our understanding of being "born again."

Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus under the cover of darkness. An important man in Hebrew society, Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Council. While the title “Pharisee” has taken on a negative, legalistic connotation, it is important to realize that the Pharisees were actually upstanding, devout, learned people. Nicodemus was intrigued by the stories he had heard about the miraculous works performed by Jesus.

During their conversation together, Jesus reveals to Nicodemus that a person must be “born from above” in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Taking the metaphor literally, Nicodemus struggled to understand Jesus’ meaning. The entire story eventually dissolved into a stirring monologue by Jesus in which he laid out what Martin Luther described as “the heart of the Bible—the Gospel in miniature.” Specifically, Jesus made the unequivocal, universal love of God abundantly clear to Nicodemus. He stated, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life,” (NRSV).

When Jesus is talking about being “born from above,” or “born again,” he was not simply talking about a singular, emotional experience. Instead, Jesus was discussing a radical transformation and a complete reorientation of the way we approach our lives. In a real way, becoming a follower of Christ means starting “anew.” Christ commands us to give up our old lives and start fresh, leaving behind our sinful habits, addictions, prejudices, guilt, grief, and indulgences. Furthermore, it means embracing a new life where one takes on heavenly attributes of compassion, love, grace, mercy, and faithfulness.

There are countless stories of transformation, but one that has always resonated with me was the story of the wolf of Gubbio. During the time when St. Francis of Assisi (1181/2-1226) was living in the city of Gubbio, a large, ferocious wolf was terrorizing the area, devouring not only livestock but also human beings. One day, St. Francis decided to go and meet the wolf. Despite being advised against going, Francis headed to a spot in the wood where he knew the wolf would be.

Immediately upon seeing Francis, the wolf came charging at him with his jaws wide open. Francis made the sign of the cross and stated, “Come here, brother wolf.” The wolf immediately closed his jaw and sat down at Francis’s feet.

Francis looked down at the wolf and chastised the wolf. “Brother wolf, you have done much evil. You have killed people and animals alike without permission from God. But, if you promise to no longer commit acts of evil, God will forgive you. Are you willing to promise to no longer attack any human beings?” The wolf lifted up his paw and placed it on Francis’ hand, consenting.

For the remainder of his days, the wolf kept his word. In fact, the wolf became a pet to the town. The town’s people fed the wolf every night and were constantly astounded by the change in his character. And, when he passed away, the once feared wolf was mourned greatly by the residents of Gubbio (Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi, XXI). Have you undergone such a radical transformation in your life? Have you truly been “born again” or are you living your pre-Christ life under a slightly different covering?

June 14, 2009

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20 or 92;
2 Corinthians 5:6-10 (11-13), 14-17;
Mark 4:26-34

From June 14 until August 9, the Hebrew Bible lectionary readings focus around King David. Therefore, it is a good time to begin a sermon series on David, if you so choose. In this week’s reading from 1 Samuel, David is anointed as the King of Israel.

Saul was the first King chosen to rule over Israel. He was a tall, strong youth and, initially, one who followed the will of the Lord. However, as Saul’s stature and power grew, he grew more prideful. He disobeyed and was disowned by God. The prophet Samuel was instructed to anoint a successor of the Lord’s choosing. He was led to the home of Jesse, the Bethlehemite. Jesse put before Samuel each of his sons, beginning with the

oldest. Much to Samuel's surprise, God did not choose any of the sons—all of whom were impressive in size and demeanor—to be king. Samuel soon discovers that Jesse's youngest son is off tending to the sheep. Upon meeting him, Samuel anoints young David king, a title that was solidified in the following years.

The most chilling verse in this passage is 1 Samuel 16: 6. As Samuel was surveying each of Jesse's sons the Lord reminded him, "... the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart," (NRSV). At a very basic level, David was not what one expected in a king. He was not the firstborn son; in fact, he was the youngest. He was not as tall or muscular as his brothers. No human being would have ever chosen David as king. However, God saw the young man's character and understood his potential and, thus, selected him to lead the people of Israel.

**“The Lord does not see
as mortals see; they look on the
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Lord looks on the heart.”**

This story serves as a solemn reminder that human beings tend to see the world in simplistic, vain, and uninformed ways. Specifically, human beings tend to be very appearance- and image-conscious. In many cases, persons who meet certain conventional standards of physical beauty are treated with more respect or affection than others. Likewise, so many of our romantic relationships are formed on an aesthetic foundation. How often have we formed a snap judgment about someone because of his or her appearance? Often we shy away from people whose outward appearances make us uncomfortable. Perhaps, the person looks intimidating, dirty, elderly, or even crippled. One lesson we can take from this passage in 1 Samuel is that we should try and see the

world with “God’s eyes”, not simply our mortal eyes. We need to do our utmost to listen and understand the will of God and not simply act out of our own instincts.

June 21, 2009

1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49; Psalm 9:9-20;
2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

In early Christian art, the Church was often symbolized by a ship sailing on a rocky sea. In fact, Clement of Alexandria (153-217) wrote in *Paedagogus* 3, 11, “And let our seals be either a dove, or a fish, or a ship scudding before the wind, or a musical lyre, which Polycrates used, or a ship’s anchor...” The image of the ship was particularly appropriate, as it symbolized the early Church’s struggle to remain afloat amidst a sea of persecution, unbelief, and various other dangers. Inspiration for this symbol was partially taken from Mark 4: 35-41. In this story, the disciples and Jesus were traveling over the water when a vicious storm broke out. Growing fearful, the disciples woke Jesus up from his slumber in the stern of the ship. Upon being awakened, Jesus confronted and tamed the restless sea with the soft, simple words, “Peace, be still.”

The story of Jesus taming the storm remains a powerful metaphor for the Christian journey. Certainly, modern Christians are confronted with a variety of obstacles to faith. Christian virtues of mercy, selflessness, forgiveness, and love are often scorned by conventional society. Similarly, belief in a resurrected savior is not popular among the imagination impaired. In contemporary times, Christians still find themselves on the rocky waters of a sea of unbelief.

Human beings of all sorts are constantly afflicted with trials and troubles in their lives. Simply put, life is not easy. Sickness, depression, financial worries, anger, grief, and disappointment plague us at every turn. This Gospel story serves as a reminder that when the waves of this world begin to rock against and flood our lives, we can find comfort in God.

And much as Jesus called the raging storms to stillness, so he calls us to stillness during the chaotic moments of our lives. Learning to turn our attention to the will and quiet of God will allow us to persevere through the troubled times in our lives.

June 28, 2009

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

Mark 5: 21-43 contains two intersecting narratives about the life-giving power of Jesus. The primary story featured the prominent synagogue leader Jairus and his gravely ill young daughter. By the time Jesus arrived at the girl's home, he discovered that she has passed away. At the conclusion of the story, Jesus raised the young girl from the dead with the words "Little girl, get up!" While Jesus was journeying to the girl's home, a woman with a rare bleeding slyly touched the hem of his cloak, with the hope of finding healing. Jesus noticed the touch and turned his attention to the woman and announced that she had been healed by her faith.

These two very memorable stories both center on the theme of restoration of life. In the case of the primary story, the little girl was literally resurrected from the dead. In the secondary story, Jesus restored quality of life to the woman. Having suffered for twelve years with a bleeding disorder, the woman was considered unclean by the ceremonially-minded Jewish culture. As a result, she was forced to live on the fringe of society and had little contact with anyone. In all probability, she had not received affection, had a meaningful conversation, or participated in society in any substantial way in twelve years. In a very real manner, Jesus restored her life with this act of healing.

For modern observers, there are a number of relatable characters in these two narratives. Some of us are like Jairus. We are people of status, respect, and wealth in our communities.

We are the first to be invited to social gathering and everyone listens closely for our opinion. And, we know responsibility. Sometimes, it feels like the world is on our shoulders. Others of us are like the suffering woman. We feel invisible and isolated from the rest of the world. Depression, sickness, and unhappiness have isolated us from the rest of the world. We feel abandoned and ignored. Desperately, we want human affection and to feel normal. Or, just maybe, some of us are like the dying little girl. Death looms over us. We face advanced age or seeming insurmountable illness. We feel like our time is running out. Maybe we've lived full lives or maybe we feel like there is much to be done. But, we desperately want to be able to live a full life again.

Most of us can see part of ourselves in at least one of these characters. We learn from these narratives a very important truth about our God; we learn that no longer how sick or healthy, rich or poor, elite or common, we have a God that takes notice of us and offers us his life-giving power. If we open ourselves up to the voice of God in our lives, we'll find that God has not abandoned us even in our darkest moments. Instead, God is beckoning each of us to "Get up!" and to live lives of productivity and hopefulness. Will you answer this call?

July 5, 2009

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Psalm 48; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

There are few tasks in this world more daunting than attempting to prove to your friends and family that have known you all your life that you are grown up. Despite my advanced education, my time as a professor, and my time as a pastor, it is still difficult for my family and childhood friends to take me seriously in any kind of ministerial or scholarly role. Perhaps they are too busy remembering an adolescent outburst or my days of wearing a red cape and proclaiming myself

“Super Mike.” Not being taken seriously by people you desperately want to prove yourself to is always very frustrating.

The reading from Mark 6: 1-13 deals with the theme of hometown rejection quite explicitly. While preaching before his hometown, people have trouble taking him seriously. They whispered amongst themselves, “Isn’t he the son of Joseph, the carpenter?” “Didn’t he grow up here among us? Who is he to teach us?” Sometimes, when we know someone personally it is difficult to take him or her seriously in a role of authority. In Luke’s version of the story (Luke 4: 14-30), the people of Nazareth were so mortified by the prospect that they might be associated with the radical message of Jesus that they tried to push him over the edge of a nearby cliff.

There are a number of interesting points we can take from this story. However, what always stands out to me is that Jesus is never horribly bothered by rejection. In fact, Jesus gives the disciples explicit instructions on how to handle rejection. He told the disciples if a town ever rejected them, they should shake off the dust that is on their feet as a testimony against them.

Do we handle rejection well? Whether it is from a potential or current employer, a potential girlfriend or boyfriend, a friend, or a family member, rejection tends to make us bitter and defensive.

Contemporary churches face a similar problem. We tend to be too focused on catering our message to the masses. We are so worried about being rejected by society, that we go out of our way to make sure we are accommodating society. Rather than teaching people how to better serve Christ, we have embraced a consumerist model. We have turned our churches into organizations that are aimed at meeting the needs of the largest number of “customers” or congregants. Rather than expanding our ministries to the poor, sick, and disenfranchised, we become consumed with having a paid nursery staff, a new organ, or a new steeple. Do we sometimes dilute the gospel message out of fear of being rejected by

society?

In the Cotton Patch Gospel, Clarence Jordan told the story of a visit he made to another minister’s church. The minister of the congregation gave him a tour of the luxurious, cushioned pews and ornate decorations. After the tour had concluded, Jordan was led outside of the church building. The two men looked up and noticed a spotlight shining on a huge cross that topped the steeple. The minister said to Jordan, “That cross alone cost \$10,000.” Jordan laughed a bit and said, “You got cheated. Times were when a Christian could get them for free.”

Perhaps, as a Christian community we need to learn to handle rejection better. Jesus was never bothered by rejection. He realized that his message still held the truth, even if was offensive and irritating to the masses. Our business as Christians is to continue to preach that offensive, irritating Gospel truth regardless of the consequences.



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