

May 11, 2008

Pentecost

Numbers 11:24-30; Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23

Pr. Craig Mueller

GETTING SPIRIT

It probably won't come as a surprise that I didn't play football in high school. But I was in the pep band. And I do remember well this rousing chant led by the cheerleaders. Perhaps you can be the other side and give me the liturgical response:

We've got spirit, yes we do.

We've got spirit, how 'bout you?

Can't you feel the energy, the optimism, the communal rush of pride? Whether you won the game or not, there was spirit. And you seemed to get that spirit by taking in the enthusiasm and ecstatic cadences of the cheer. You loved your team. You loved the game. You loved your school.

Here we are years later in a more subdued setting. Older and wiser. Perhaps a little jaded and cautious. And it's Pentecost. The third great festival of the Christian year. None of the trappings, traditions and sentimentality of Christmas. None of the crowds of Easter. Where is the spirit of this day? We've tried to plan a celebration filled with fiery colors, with flowers and rousing music, with prayers in other languages, with incense and banner, and even some dance. But the huge crowds are gathering several blocks east of here ... for a baseball game.

Don't you want to stand outside on the sidewalk and shout to the crowds passing by on: We've got spirit, yes we do. We've got the "holy spirit," how 'bout you? But they might think we're holy rollers and we will dance in the aisles and speak in tongues. We're Lutherans after all. So we'll just keep the doors closed. Do our ritual and prayer. And get on with the day.

But what is this spirit that draws us together? What is this religious talk about the Holy Spirit and what is it?

In the Hebrew scriptures the word "spirit" can also be translated as "breath" and "wind." The spirit is the breath and wind that gives life to the people. At creation God breathes divine life into human beings and that's how you get the spirit, so to speak. Early on that spirit also seemed to rest on charismatic leaders—like Moses in our first reading. Here God takes some of the divine spirit from Moses and puts it on seventy elders who then prophesy. Leadership will be shared in a new way. They get some spirit for a purpose.

In our gospel the risen Christ breathes on the disciples. That's how they get the spirit. It is the spirit of the Risen Christ that calls them to service and to a ministry of reconciliation. Pentecost is the fulfillment of Easter.

In Acts there is a mighty wind, fire and tongues. When the people get the spirit, other languages flow from their lips. Yet the crowd that is gathered understands. They hear the gospel in their own language. This spirit unites people from every race and nation. And is a sign of God's promise for the end times: the Spirit will be poured out on all people.

So often we think of the Holy Spirit as living in that deep place within ourselves, within our hearts. That may be true. But Pentecost pushes the boundaries. Getting this spirit stirs things up. And gives us the gift of "the other." Something and someone beyond ourselves. Including people from every nation, race and tongue.

I have a four-star movie recommendation for you this Pentecost. It will touch and stir your spirit. It will fill you with wonder for the gift of the human family in all its diversity. The movie is: *The Visitor*. Now showing at a theater near you. Get there to get some spirit.

In the movie Walter Vale is without much spirit, sleepwalking through life after his wife's death. When he travels to New York for business he finds two undocumented immigrants living in his apartment there. These two hard-working Muslims are vibrantly alive, one plays the drum and the other sells jewelry on the street. But they don't have a visa. As Walter finds new spirit for his life through friendship and drumming he gets involved the plight of Tarek and Zainab.

The movie *The Visitor* invite us to consider the gift of “the other:” the stranger, the person or part of ourselves we might not have otherwise come in contact with. As these unlikely people become friends we are touched by the human spirit in us all, even as we ponder the role of immigrants and refugees in our post-9/11 world. And a spirit is stirred up that wants to bang a drum, to dance, to raise a ruckus and to stir things up in the world, in the church, and in our lives.

This divine spirit, this spirit of life, this Holy Spirit, is let loose at Pentecost. As Christians we say that this spirit is poured out on us in baptism. That it enlivens at the table of risen Christ. We say that it is fire and wind and breath and energy. It is red hot and passionate. It is the spirit that makes us alive and filled with desire for God, for life, for love, for justice, for all good things.

Surely we get this spirit when we gather together as the people of God. It seems to come to us in community. The Spirit isn't just mine, it's ours. *We've got spirit, together, we do.*

But now that this spirit is set loose in the world, there's no stopping it. I conclude with these words of Edwina Gately: *Once upon a time we captured God and put God in a box and we put a beautiful velvet curtain around the box. We placed candles and flowers around the box and we said to the poor and the dispossessed, “Come! Come and see what we have! Come and see God!” And they knelt before the God in the box. One day, very long ago, the Spirit in the box turned the key from the inside and she pushed it open. She looked around in the church and saw there was nobody there! They had all gone. Not a soul was in the place. She said to herself, “I'm getting out!” The Spirit shot out of the box. She escaped and she has been sighted a few times since then. She was last seen with a bag lady in McDonald's. (from “Prophetic Mission”)*