

A Wild Story Full of Truth—Acts 2: 1-21

May 19, 2024- Pentecost Sunday

Sometimes you come through a hard patch in life and you wonder, “How did I ever get through that?” I’m talking of the really tough events like death, illness (physical or mental), divorce, addiction, being fired—the kind of experiences that take something out of us, that exact a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual cost. You ask that question because you are aware that during that time there is something more at work in your life than your own limited reserves of strength and energy. How about this? You are at a child’s graduation, at a family reunion surrounded by the generations, on the shores of a lake watching a sunset and you are overcome with a sense of gratitude, at the blessing that is your life and you wonder, “how did I get here, how did I get to this point of blessing in my life?” You look back and you see the grace and serendipity that leads you to where you are now. I want to use these examples to shine light on an observation about today’s faith story and life in general—the presence of the Spirit in our lives is quite often a remembered event. We are hardly ever aware of the Spirit’s work and presence when it is happening, it is only by looking back with the evidence of the present that we see it.

The Spirit sneaks up on us. It happens with my former and late neighbour Jerry. At the time he is in his seventies. Jerry is the kind of guy who loves to talk, always happy for a conversation partner. He radiates a quiet contentment about life. It hasn’t always been this way though. Jerry is a recovering alcoholic, going on 30 years. He devotes much of his life to AA and helping recovering addicts.

He tells me there is one day in his recovery that particularly stands out for him. It’s a February morning, about four years into his recovery. He goes to the window of his apartment and there’s a good foot of snow on the ground, so he puts on his boots and coat and clears off the car. He comes inside, by this time his wife is up, she makes a pot of coffee and they share a mug each, have breakfast together, and Jerry drives her to work. Doesn’t sound like much does it? Except, when Jerry pulls back into his parking spot, in that quiet moment between the time he turns off the ignition and just before he reaches for the handle of the door a thought crosses his mind. A thought so shocking in what it reveals that he simply freezes, his body trying to catch up with this new realization. As it sinks in, his posture begins to come loose and break open as tears of joy and gratitude express fully what words can only describe. The thought Jerry has is a simple observation; in the quiet of the car, he observes his day is about two and a half hours old and he has yet to think about how he is going to sneak a drink. In fact, it is the first time since Jerry is 11 years of age that he hasn’t woken up with his first thought being how he is going to get a drink. What joy, what gratitude, what a gift!

The Spirit sneaks up on us. I suspect this same kind of thing is what generates our Pentecost story. Luke, the writer of Acts is “struggling to bring to reality something of

the truth about the church.”¹ When Luke looks around at the Christian community of his time the evidence of the Spirit is everywhere. What attracts people to this new movement isn't their beliefs, it is the lives and the community of these Jesus followers. The book of Acts describes a depth of caring--Widows and orphans who are often left to fend for themselves to live in poverty are cared for by the community. There is a radical equality before God—although men and women, Jew and gentile, slave and free live apart on the outside, in the worshipping community they are equal. There is real community—a sharing of possessions, a sense that everyone as a member of the body of Christ has something to contribute. Luke sees a complete transformation of human relationships based on the love Jesus models and teaches.

Perhaps the other thing Luke contemplates is how this community thrives despite the criminal execution of Jesus and the persecution of his followers. I imagine him looking back to the beginning and trying to speak of the source of this movement whose success is so out of proportion to the power and influence of its leader and its followers. Description and explanation seem so inadequate to Luke, so he writes a story of something strange, beyond imagination, to explain the existence of the early church². The story of a Spirit given by Jesus, the Holy Spirit, that transforms lives.

Here is something I see in Luke and Jerry's stories that reflects something I have learned about the Spirit's presence in my life. When I make small, everyday decisions that are rooted in faith and surrender to the Spirit, when I make decisions that are life-affirming, that show compassion towards others and towards myself, these decisions are more than just changes in behaviour, they are an invitation for God's Spirit to dwell in my life, to help me discover my best and truest self. In time as I make more and more room for the Spirit, it can no longer be hidden but reveals itself in peace, joy and gratitude and must be shared.

The presence of the Spirit is often a remembered event looking backwards. But life is lived forward, and it can be tough to sense the Spirit in the mire of life, especially when I make small, everyday decisions that are rooted in fear, that are life-denying, that demonstrate a judgmental attitude towards myself or others. I close the door to the Spirit. I sense the hollowness and the emptiness of life, the anxiety and worry about other's perceptions that make me want to escape life or medicate its pain. The Spirit is always with me, but I'm not always with the Spirit.

That's why faith is so vital, faith that even in the hardest times God's divine spark cannot be extinguished, God's Spirit is always with us, a constant companion. We make small faithful decisions, having just enough light for the next step. It's when we come through it, whatever it is, slowly and gradually and we come out the other side and we look back and we wonder how we got through the challenges of the time with such courage and faith? It strikes us that mere description and explanation aren't enough and our body

¹ Will Willimon, *Commentary on Acts*, New Interpretation Series, p. 29.

² Will Willimon, *Commentary on Acts*, New Interpretation Series, p. 29.

will release gratitude with tears or perhaps we will tell a story which captures the power we felt with incredible vividness, 'it must have been the Spirit of God come like a rushing wind, tongues of fire and a new language implanted in my soul.' May it be so.

Rev. Joe Gaspar