

Spiritual Ecstasy

sermon digest

Pentecost, May 11, 2008

Acts 2:1-2

larry dipboye

Pentecost was an event in history. Identified with the beginning of the church, the event came during the Jewish celebration of Pentecost, named for the *fiftieth* day from the beginning of Passover, the celebration of the giving of the Law to Moses and the harvest of grain. Christian Pentecost came fifty days after Easter and celebrated the gift of the Spirit and the harvest of souls. According to Luke, the Spirit came upon the Apostles with the sound of a violent wind, the fury of “tongues, as of fire,” and a chaotic cacophony of public speech. Jerusalem was filled with pilgrims there for the annual Jewish festival. The Aramaic chatter of the Apostles was heard by the international audience in the various languages of home. Some observers were awed by the miracle of speech that brought the nations together, perhaps a direct reference to the chaos of the Tower of Babel in Genesis that divided the nations. Cynics concluded that the Apostles were drunk, and the first task of Peter’s famous Pentecost sermon was to dispel the rumor that the Apostles had been drinking wine at nine o’clock in the morning.

Spiritual ecstasy suggests drunken revelry. The identity of the Spirit of God with the excitement of Pentecost has always been somewhat controversial in Christian history, and the identity of the Holy Spirit has been something of a mystery. Early creeds elaborated the person and work of Christ and clearly connected God the Father as Creator of heaven and earth, but the Holy Spirit was like an appendix or afterthought added to the concern for the identity of the Christ. When the Anabaptists came along during the Reformation with a strong emphasis on the work of the Spirit, they were dismissed by Lutherans as *Schwärmer*, radicals or enthusiasts. Movements that focused on the Holy Spirit, like the Quakers and the Shakers, were named for the behavior that seemed to characterize their worship. The Great Awakening revival movements at the beginning of U.S. history were known for emotional extremism especially on the frontiers. The Holy Spirit came to be associated with dancing, clapping, shouting, noisy chatter, rolling on the ground, and seizures or fits.

Long before the time of Christ, Greek mythology identified Dionysus as the god of wine and drunken revelry, a patron of the theater, and an agricultural/fertility god. His half-brother Apollo, on the other hand, was just the opposite—a god of intellect, logic, and reason. Some believe that Jesus’ miracle of turning water to wine in the Fourth Gospel was a statement that Jesus was greater than Dionysus the god of wine. Paul advised Christians of Ephesus, “Do not get drunk with wine. . .but be filled with the Spirit,” (Eph. 5:18) suggesting a connection and contrast of the experience of the Holy Spirit and alcoholic inebriation. He also chided the Corinthians for getting drunk at the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:21). The confusion of the Holy Spirit with the effect of wine by cynics seems to have been a question of discussion among the earliest Christians.

From 1965-1970, during seminary graduate study, I was pastor of a small congregation in West Point, Kentucky. The Salt River poured into the Ohio River at West Point and periodically the rivers ran through the streets and into the buildings in town. Our church building was constructed by members at the turn of the century. Like the houses in town, the church bore scars of previous floods. One casualty was the baptistry. The baptismal pool was made of concrete located under the pulpit floor. The pressure of the flood waters on the outside of the concrete walls caused cracks to form. The water leaked out before it could be brought up to body temperature. After a winter baptism, one of the men noticed my blue complexion and decided that we ought to do something about the baptistry. He worked for a distillery in Louisville and was certain that he could get the company to donate one of the cast-off copper drums used in the production of whiskey. He explained that he could weld a waterproof copper lining to go inside the concrete pool and solve our problem. The deacons graciously declined his offer. Can you imagine what the newspaper would do with this information? “Baptist Church Confuses Spirits in Baptistry” or “Prohibitionists Make Spiritual Adjustment.”

At the height of the 1960’s “charismatic movement,” New Testament scholar Frank Stagg attempted to correct some of the confusion among “Charismatic Christians” with the protest that all Christians are charismatic, gifted by God, and that too much has been made of spiritual ecstasy. He compared modern charismatics to early Gnostic heresies. Ecstasy means literally “to stand outside.” Like Gnostics, charismatics sought to escape from the body through a spiritual experience. During this era, we read of some seminary students experimenting with hallucinogenic street drugs attempting to imitate the ecstasy of a spiritual, out-of-body, experience. We are all aware that the street drug named *ecstasy* leaves its victims with anything but an experience of God or of a new life of hope.

The experience of God involves the whole person. Christians have long struggled between Apollo and Dionysus—the extremes of a cold, logical, mental faith and a wild, reckless, emotional faith. One extreme distorts the reality of God as much as the other. I was talking with a friend who had recently retired as an engineer. He was constantly going back to work in his old department. I asked one day, why the old guys

were needed. He mused that young engineers are very well educated. They are masters of the computer and all of the data that can be contained in artificial intelligence, but they can't build anything. Old engineers are needed for their experience in applying the principles of engineering to a real project.

Out of personal experience we tend to lean one way or the other. Theological education has tilted my interest toward trying to understand the faith, but it has not locked the door to my experience of God. A funny thing happened in the process of education. I discovered spiritual experiences in the prayers and biographies of Christian forebears that would never have occurred in the natural flow of events of my daily life. I find a mirror to my own spirituality in the experiences of biblical people of faith as well as in early Christians like Augustine, St. Francis, and Martin Luther. I recall a conversation a few years ago with a man who came to counsel about how to experience God. It did not take long to get to the bottom of his quest. He had a drinking problem. The AA program in which he was involved called for an acknowledgment of a higher power. According to Scott Peck, AA began with the suggestion by a psychiatrist to an alcoholic to seek religious conversion. The man in my office was trying to find a door out of alcoholism into a spiritual journey, but there was a problem. He was very well educated, and he had seen a lot of emotional manipulation of people in his early experience of church. He was very uncomfortable with any suggestion that he should have some ecstatic experience of God that would take him away from his daily struggle with alcohol. I made the wild suggestion that perhaps he ought to use his God-given mind and educational skill in reading and learning about the Christian faith. The Spirit of God is described as a spirit of wisdom. The spirituality of Apollo may be more valid than the drunken visions of Dionysus.

However, to attempt to exist without passion, without emotion, without any feeling towards ourselves and others is about as foolish as attempting to live without food and water. One of my seminary professors told about visiting an anatomy lab in a medical school while involved in a postdoctoral sabbatical. The instructor had the students gather around a cadaver while he pointed out some of the basics of the human body. He separated tissues that exposed a small white string inside the arm that he identified as a nerve, then he gave the lesson of the day. The anatomy instructor informed the student ministers that people really do have nerves. The ability to feel is as important as the ability to circulate nutrients to the cells through the vascular system.

All that God is meets all that we are in the divine-human encounter. The complexity of God and the variety of religious experience are too great to allow us to dismiss someone else's experience of God. God met the worshipers on Pentecost in emotional ecstasy of wind and flames, but also in the rational preaching of Peter and the unifying miracle of tongues.