

NEVER TO BE THE SAME

Pentecost: Transformed

Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23

This Pentecost we are celebrating
the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.
Sounds so good, so fitting, so spiritually *right*.
Who *wouldn't* want the Holy Spirit to transform us?

Am *I* the only one who's not sure I *want* to be transformed?
Am I the only one who finds the whole idea of being transformed,
a little overwhelming . . . intimidating . . . even frightening?

Well, I've had more time to ponder the question this week,
and I just suddenly dropped it on you,
so I don't blame you for apparently being
so blissfully eager to be transformed.

But let me tell you why, when it comes to transformation,
you should be careful what you wish for.

Transformation doesn't only mean we become better people—
a little nicer, kinder, more spiritually aware.
Transformation means our lives are *completely rearranged*.
One of the enduring metaphors of Pentecost,
one of primary symbols of the Holy Spirit,
is that of a flame.
The Spirit as fire.

The image comes from the story we just heard in Acts 2,
when the disciples received the Holy Spirit,
and the sign that accompanied it was
the appearance of tongues of fire on their heads.

Fire is a perfect metaphor for what happened to the disciples
after the Holy Spirit fell on them at Pentecost.

Fire *transforms*.
Fire really doesn't destroy physical matter.

It rearranges it.
It forces a radical chemical change.

Before we toss a piece of firewood onto the campfire
or into a wood stove,
it contains within its structure *immense* amounts of energy,
but that energy is bound up in the wood fibers.
It isn't going anywhere.
It isn't going to be fundamentally changed from its current form.
Unless it is *trans*-formed by fire.
The heat of the fire loosens up the energy
trapped within the molecular structure of the log,
to where the molecules are set free of their old bonds,
and make new bonds.
What used to be wood fiber molecules, are *transformed*
into carbon, water, oxygen, hydrogen,
and probably lots of other stuff
which I don't pretend to know *anything* about.
Ask our resident chemists Glenn Kauffman or Tara Kishbaugh.

The point I'm making, is that after contact with transforming fire,
the wood was completely changed into a radically different form.
That's a pretty good analogy of what the Holy Spirit is likely to do.
The Holy Spirit—if we fully open ourselves to the Spirit's work—
will rearrange the molecules of our lives, so to speak.

Being transformed into the likeness of Christ
certainly *sounds* well and good.
But it's not to be taken lightly.
Radical life change can have all sorts of
unexpected and unintended side effects.
It can destroy what we *formerly* thought to be true
about ourselves, or about God, or about the world.
It can result in a heightened state of chaos and confusion,
as those things we *used* to cling to,
start crumbling around us.
It can result in significant loss—
loss of job security, loss of certain relationships,
loss of identity, loss of order, loss of income.

For our Anabaptist ancestors,
and many other Christians throughout history,
and even *today*,
it can result in loss of life.

But I would guess many of us can look back on our own life story,
and recall a time when we surrendered ourselves in some way,
to the transforming work of God in our lives.
And even in the midst of the sense that *God* was in this,
all of a sudden there was *also* more chaos, confusion, and loss.

That happened to Irene and me, one year after I graduated from college,
when we listened to what we believed God was saying,
and moved ourselves, with our 3-month-old Andrea,
to help start a church in a city in North Florida,
where I had no paying job lined up,
and we knew only about a half-dozen people.
That decision to go, at what we sensed was the Holy Spirit's urging,
and our willingness to be transformed,
introduced a whole lot of chaos and loss into our lives.
And *frankly*, there was more loss for Irene than for me.

But it also opened up a new life path for us.
Being utterly dependent on God and others,
was anxiety-producing,
but spiritually rich, and invigorating.

When we open ourselves to transformation,
we will lose something in the process.
We will lose something.

But we also launch into a new way of living,
with the potential for deeper joy, purpose, and meaning
than we never dreamed possible.
The old loyalties and identities may go up in smoke,
but there are new loyalties and new identities to replace them.

And the new ones are the ones we were actually *created* for.
Not having the kind of job we dreamed about . . .

Not having the way of life our culture taught us to aspire to . . .
might be unnerving.
But when we re-align ourselves with our created purposes,
when we re-order our lives around God's priorities for the world,
we make possible a deeper joy and peace.
And that trumps any anxiety and insecurity that erupts
when the old gets consumed in the fire.

So despite my hesitation in asking to be transformed,
it's something I really *do* want . . . at least at some level.
I just need to pray for the courage to seek it.

I like the metaphor of fire for the Holy Spirit,
for the reasons I just stated.
I also like the metaphor of wind, or breath,
which we also heard in this morning's readings,
for the Day of Pentecost.

But it's important that we make those metaphors work for us
in the way they were intended.
They've often gotten *mis*-used.

The Christian movement we call "Pentecostal-*ism*,"
in its broadest sense,
has had a huge impact on the Christian church around the world,
and mostly for the good.
It has had a positive impact on the Mennonite Church,
and we're still discovering the points of connection
between Anabaptism and Pentecostalism.
At our last couple General Assemblies,
there have been guest Pentecostal preachers,
who brought together pacifism and social action,
with a lively experience in the Holy Spirit,

But there some ways that Christians commonly misuse
these metaphors of fire and wind for the work of the Holy Spirit.

I know I, for one, have heard lots of talk in the church about
“being on fire for the Lord”—
a phrase used to describe someone
who’s had an encounter with the Holy Spirit.

Being “on fire” for God is a wonderful thing, of course.
If the Spirit is a flame of fire,
then being “*on* fire” is something we should all aim to be.
But usually when I hear that expression,
I’m not quite sure what the speaker means by it.
Sometimes, being “on fire” sounds like
being excited about Jesus,
being exuberant and zealous for the Lord,
with uninhibited enthusiasm.
So if someone’s faith isn’t visibly bursting at the seams,
if they are not always talking about their relationship with Jesus,
if they are not engaged in vibrant, spirited,
emotionally-intense worship,
then they’re not “on fire for the Lord.”
Then I begin to say “wait a minute.”
That’s like saying unless there’s a forest burning out of control,
there’s not really a fire.

Sometimes, no doubt, the Spirit burns like an inferno.
And leaves in its wake, a rapidly changed landscape,
like the devastating wildfires in Arizona last week.
But sometimes it burns like a candle.
Slowly, but surely, shedding light and warmth.
But it’s the same Holy Spirit.
And it’s still fire.
There is still transformation.
Whether in a raging wildfire,
or in one of the tiny tea lights we use in our Taizé services,
there is an identical chemical reaction happening,
that’s rearranging the molecules.

There is really only one reliable sign
that someone is “on fire for the Lord”—
Is their life being rearranged?

Can we see evidence of transformation?

In the case of the Holy Spirit doing the transforming,
the evidence is predictable.
We will see the fruit of the Spirit exhibited.
The by-products of the fire of the Holy Spirit
isn’t carbon-dioxide and such.
It’s love, joy, peace,
patience, kindness, generosity,
faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The Spirit-fire that rearranges our lives *will by definition*,
make us more loving, more patient, more generous.
There is a difference between fire that works . . . and fireworks.
The color and the noise of fireworks are lots of fun, of course.
They are exciting to watch.
But they don’t change our lives.

The mighty acts of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost,
that Luke told us about in Acts 2,
were not just fireworks.
Yes, Pentecost was an astonishing sight.
It drew big crowds, like any good fireworks show.
But the real miracle that happened that day
was not the sound of the violent wind,
it was not the vision of tongues of fire resting on their heads,
it was not the ability to speak and understand other languages.
The miracle of Pentecost was that
the fire of the Holy Spirit rearranged some molecules.
Lives were transformed into
something *different* than they were *before* the Spirit-fire came.
People were more loving.
Luke writes that they “devoted themselves to fellowship.”
People were more joyful.
Luke writes that they “praised God . . . with glad hearts.”
People were more generous.
Luke writes that with “generous hearts”
they distributed their possessions to those in need.

So this group of disciples that the four Gospels describe, almost *always*,
as bickering, or competitive, or confused, or fearful,
are transformed into a
sharing, loving, vibrant, and growing Christian community.

Whether the fire of the Spirit burns
as a roaring fire or as a candle makes no difference.
What makes the difference is whether we let the fire burn,
and allow our life structure to get rearranged.

The same point can be made about the metaphor of the Spirit as wind.
In Acts 2, there is the sound of a rushing, violent wind, it says.
Sounds a bit like the news stories
coming out of Missouri and Kansas and Alabama recently.
But wind doesn't *always* roar.

We saw this in John 20, the children's story.
The disciples were together in one place.
Possibly the same house they were in at Pentecost.
They were fearful.
They were behind closed doors,
hiding from the people who crucified Jesus.
Then Jesus "came and stood among them,"
and he said, "Peace be with you."
And the room was filled with a pervasive
warmth and joy and wonder.
The disciples were breathless.
And then Jesus breathed *on* them.
Breathed.
And said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."
That's *all*.
No flaming tongues of fire.
No earthquakes.
No violent wind . . . just *wwhho*.
"Receive the Holy Spirit."
And they *did*.
They received the Holy Spirit just as decisively as they did
in the story that Luke told us.

That's the way it is with the Spirit.
Sometimes it blows with great force,
or it burns like an inferno.
Sometimes it gently exhales,
or burns like a candle.

But it's the same Spirit.
And always, *always*,
the breath and the fire of the Holy Spirit,
will transform us.
It will rearrange our lives.
If we *receive* the breath and fire.
God has given us the power to resist.
We can shield ourselves from the wind.
We can put out the flame.
Transformation is God's work alone.
But we are invited to open ourselves to it.
If we have the courage.

I'm guessing many of us can remember times that
God changed the landscape in our lives and relationships,
quickly and dramatically.
Maybe a life-shaking event, good *or* bad,
or an unforgettable spiritual encounter.

But I'll bet the work of the Spirit we miss out on most often,
is of the candlelight variety, and the gentle breath.
Jesus is still coming and standing among us, as in John 20,
and saying "receive the Holy Spirit."
It can happen any number of different ways,
if we have the courage to be open and attentive.
And it *does* take courage.

Freedom is wonderful!
But if we have gotten used to being bound,
then being transformed and set free,
is not always a welcome change.
Nevertheless, we are well to hope for it, and pray for it.

Open your bulletins to the order of worship, if you will,
and at the same time, turn to *Sing the Journey*, the green book, #32

In a moment, I'll ask us to read together this affirmation of faith,
and then sing the hymn as a response.

But before we do, let's spend a few moments in silence,
listening for the breath,
looking for the flame.

Let's be attentive to Jesus' invitation to "receive the Holy Spirit,"
in whatever form that may be coming to us.

Watch and listen,
for what the Spirit may be saying,
either in our individual lives, or in our life together,
about the kind of transformation God wants to work in us.

[silence . . .]

Affirmation of Faith:

Leader: The Spirit of Christ transforms us with wind and flame,

People: empowering us to testify, and energizing us to serve.

Leader: We turn to Jesus

People: and receive the sending power of the Spirit

*If you believe and I believe and we together pray,
the Holy Spirit must come down and set God's people free
and set God's people free, and set God's people free,
The Holy Spirit must come down and set God's people free.*

—Phil Kniss, June 12, 2011