

Day of Pentecost (Year B) – May 24, 2015
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 104: 25-35, 37b; Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Pentecost: The Dove and the Wild Goose

“We remember,[O Lord], that your church was born in wind and fire, not to sweep us heavenward like a presumptuous tower, but to guide us down the dusty roads of this world so that we may lift up the downcast, heal the broken, reconcile what was lost, and bring peace amidst unrest.”

– Garth House, Litanies for All Occasionsⁱ

Pentecost is the Festival of the Holy Spirit. Totally dependable and yet utterly unpredictable, gentle and yet wild, comforting and yet challenging, quiet and yet appropriately loud—the Holy Spirit cannot be neatly described nor contained. It blows where it will, taking us along its journey. To explain the inexplicable Spirit—to describe the indescribable—our reading from Acts portrays the presence of the Holy Spirit as being “like the rush of a violent wind” and like “tongues as of fire.” Elsewhere in Scripture, the presence of God’s Spirit is variously depicted as a “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12, KJV); or as the Advocate or Comforter or Strengthener depending on how you translate the word *Parakletos* from our gospel reading; or as a dove as found in various gospel depictions of the Holy Spirit (e.g. Luke 3:22); or simply as Truth (in all of what that means). The multi-layered symbolism of the dove is described as follows by one observer:

“Innocence, beauty, and simplicity are the legendary virtues of the docile, inquisitive bird with the softly feathered, round body, elegant head and bright eye. Sweetly, it watches from the rafters at divine births; [it] hovers in amorous pairs at depictions of...marriage; [it] takes wing as the spirit of hope, herald of good tidings and [it is the] emblem of peace. Its cooing, billing, pattering are homely and companionable...[even our burial sites are called] *columbaria* [literally meaning] ‘dove cotes’...In the [ancient stories] of Babylonia and Judaism, a dove circles the subsiding waters of the primal flood and returns with the olive branch, sign of renewal after inundation. As the fertilizing wind of the Holy Spirit, the dove impregnates the Virgin Mary; and at the baptism of Jesus, [this dove-like Spirit] consecrates her human-divine son...For thousands of years, the rushing sound of a dove’s rapid wing beats has meant the advent of a supernal emissary, the saving inspiration that out of the blue alights at the critical time; or, as the luminous soul departing, presses its wings into eternity.”ⁱⁱ

Now, along with these Biblical names and the metaphor of the dove to depict the Holy Spirit, I would commend to you another metaphor, this one from the Celtic Christian tradition of Scotland. In that tradition, the Holy Spirit is represented not as a dove—peaceful and pure—but rather as a wild goose! Geese are not controllable, and have a habit of biting those who try to contain them. They make a lot of noise with their honking, which they do especially to encourage the others in the flock as they fly; or, on the ground,

to identify dangers. Like the wild goose, the uncontainable Spirit of God demands a hearing. Its song is not always sweet and calming, but can also be strong, challenging and unnerving. The wild goose of Pentecost corrals people together and demands that they support and travel with one another. Those whom the wild goose encounters are thereby often compelled themselves to become noisy, passionate and courageous guardians of the gospel and gospel values. What do I mean by that? Well, forget the quiet cooing of the dove for a moment: The Spirit of Pentecost *honks*, commanding that we be attentive to the needs of the poor. “Honk!” shouts the Spirit of Pentecost when justice is denied, when dignity is demeaned, when rights are deprived, when evil goes unchallenged, when life is not respected. “Honk!” sounds the Spirit, calling out the good news to all, without discrimination, the good news of Christ in our midst, at work in and through us and others who join his mission of reconciling human hearts and repairing the world. It was this same windy, fiery, forceful, honking Spirit of Christ that renewed and transformed the first disciples of Jesus, not just once on the Day of Pentecost, but over and over again at every juncture of the early church’s growth and development, continually broadening and deepening the purpose and power of their mission and ministry.

St. Augustine once wrote that what the soul is to the body so the Holy Spirit is to the Body of Christ—the Church.ⁱⁱⁱ The Spirit energizes and empowers congregations, and in any parish there are those who, because of their enthusiasm and leadership, are readily identifiable agents of the Holy Spirit, the wild goose. They make things happen; they energize and empower. Thank God there are such agents here in this parish. And yet, of course, there are others here who may not be as easily identified, but who in their own quieter way offer eloquent testimony to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, the dove, through their witness and ministries, whether they are tending the grounds of the church, preparing the altar, or preparing a meal at the local Shelter, connecting with our neighborhood children, visiting at a nursing home, quietly praying for others, or serving and engaging responsibly with others at home and in the workplace and the wider community. Let us discover, acknowledge and celebrate that God can be found in the “tongues as of fire” of the wild geese, the movers and shakers among us, *and also* in the quieter tones and voices of those who labor in love in less visible ways.^{iv}

The newly empowered community of the Spirit, as recorded in our reading from Acts, wasn’t just sent to serve the diverse peoples around it—it was to be itself that diversity in unity. In our reading from Acts, the depiction of the Spirit in the form of “divided tongues as of fire” coming to rest on each of the disciples portrays this well. As if by some holy contagion, the Spirit, speaking through the disciples, was communicated to all nearby who assembled in a large crowd, as each one heard in his or her own language. We then hear a listing of the nations represented among the crowd who each heard in their own language while becoming one in the power of the Holy Spirit. Anyone with a map of the ancient Near Eastern world as it existed in 30 AD (CE) will realize that this list encompassed the whole world as known at that time by Mediterranean peoples. The point is that the Spirit of God reaches, gathers, forms, empowers and calls forth the entire world.

This story is in direct contrast to an even more ancient story found in the book of Genesis (11:1-9)—a story of a proud people who had gathered to build a tower which reached to great heights. But their arrogance and self-righteousness at their supposed self-sufficient craftiness and ability—independent of God and anyone else—led to their downfall. Their tower construction ceased and they found themselves scattered, divided and isolated. They no longer had the ability even to communicate with each other when their common language had been divided into many.

Well, on Pentecost, this old curse of the Tower of Babel (or Babble, if you will) is reversed. The blessing given by the Holy Spirit as described in the Book of Acts seared through the scatteredness of humanity, uniting the many tongues of division. Community is created by the Spirit of Pentecost, a community built on renewed love and respect, communication and understanding, moving forward as the wild goose of justice and the quiet dove of loving kindness.^v And from understanding comes relationship; from relationship comes trust; and from trust is built all the rest of the foundations of human and spiritual community. And so Pentecost is a partnership—built upon the recognition that everyone matters to God and needs to be taken into account. Life together in the Holy Spirit calls into existence a community where all are woven into common effort to serve the common good, and where praying and singing, speaking and serving together enables each and all to understand and be understood.

Let us go forth together rejoicing in the power of the Spirit! Amen.

ⁱ Garth House, Litanies for All Occasions (Judson Press, 1989)

ⁱⁱ From “Dove” in The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), pp. 244, 246.

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 267.

^{iv} Acts 2, verse 1 states, “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” And in John’s gospel, this great event of empowerment is placed in the scene of the Risen Jesus appearing to the disciples on Easter Day. Significantly, in both accounts, the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, and the “birth” of the early church took place only after the people were all together. And their empowerment did not create just a cacophony of honking geese and cooing doves each going their own way, but rather a community of diversity in unity. As St. Paul put it, “...so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another...To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” [Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:7]. Thus the movement of the Spirit is personal but not private. Empowerment is not just for a privileged few, nor just for our individual benefit, but for all, so that together we can set about building and renewing our communities of faith which can act as instruments of God’s love and justice, restoring our hearts and repairing God’s world.

^v Of course, being together even in one place does not mean that we are all always singing the same hymn, as it were, or reading even from the same page. The Pentecost experience recorded in Acts revealed that each heard in his or her own language, thus maintaining and respecting individual as well as diverse national/ethnic and linguistic identities. What is important to note is that they were able to understand each other.