The Day of Pentecost: Baptism of Matthew Ryan Doody and Emma Elizabeth Kruglik

June 4, 2017

Susan L. Davidson

All Saints’, Wolcott

“No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit,” says the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the often-rebellious Christians in the Church in Corinth, and so began the Jesus Movement. “Jesus is Lord” was the very first statement of faith which persons made at the time of their Baptism in the early days of the development of the Church. Over the next several centuries, as the Church’s understanding of Jesus developed, that single, simple phrase grew into the three-paragraph Apostle’s Creed; the affirmation of faith which we will recite together later this morning. In his letter, Paul describes many dimensions of the gifts of the Holy Spirit which were visible then and still are today, all those gifts which we receive at Baptism, when we die and rise with Christ in the waters of the Font and are “marked as Christ’s own forever.” Baptism is an Easter moment and, so, is especially significant in Eastertide.

Today is the Feast of Pentecost – the fiftieth and final day of the Church’s celebration of Easter, and the second most important day in the Church Year. (No, not Christmas, but Pentecost!) It’s known informally as the Birthday of the Church. The Holy Spirit of God – the Spirit which Jesus, at the time of his Ascension into heaven, promised to send his disciples, arrived in a very dramatic manner, the Bible tells us, whether you read the account in the Acts of the Apostles or the very different account in the Gospel of John. This morning, we heard both.

The Evangelist Luke, author of the Acts of the Apostles, tells us that the very earliest followers of Jesus were in Jerusalem, celebrating the Feast of Pentecost, an ancient Jewish harvest festival which closed the Passover season, when the Holy Spirit came upon them like a fiery whirlwind, changed their lives forever, and sent them out on a mission to change the world. Luke says that the Spirit came “like the sound of a violent wind” that filled the whole house, and that “divided tongues, as of fire . . . rested on each of them.” Such a powerful image! The disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, who gave them the ability to speak and be understood in languages different from their own, so they would be able to spread the Good News of God’s love and mercy to all the known world. Jews from all those other nations named, who were living in Jerusalem, were astonished and wondered what it all meant. Some even wondered if they were drunk! But no, they were just filled with the Holy Spirit.

It was this Spirit, Jesus had promised them, who would guide them into all truth; this Spirit whom Jesus gave them to strengthen them at times when their faith began to fail them; to encourage them when they were afraid; to bring joy out of sorrow, faith out of fear, hope out of despair, love out of hate, even life out of death. It was this Spirit upon whom they could depend to bring the power of God in Christ Jesus right into their midst, to turn worldly powers upside-down.

The author of the Gospel of John, writing years later, when martyrs were being made daily, and being a follower of Jesus was a dangerous and life-threatening vocation, tells a very different story about the coming of the Holy Spirit upon that first rag-tag band of Jesus’ followers. In his account, the Holy Spirit comes upon those disciples on the evening of the first Easter Day. At that point, only Mary Magdalene had encountered and spoken with the Risen Christ, in the Garden of the Resurrection. All these disciples knew was that Jesus’ body was gone from the tomb and Mary *said* she had “seen the Lord.” Maybe they wondered if *she* had been drunk! They clung together, hiding in a house probably borrowed from a friend. They were probably convinced that the Temple leaders would be coming after them to have them killed, even as they had turned Jesus over to the Romans to be put to death. They had not yet seen Jesus, risen from the dead. As they clung together for safety in that locked room, Jesus suddenly appeared among them. (Not your everyday occurrence!) Jesus’ greeting was “Peace be with you.” Peace. It was then that *they* “saw the Lord.” As if appearing through locked doors was not enough of a mystery, Jesus then did something really odd. He breathed on them – just as the story in Genesis says God breathed life into the first man and woman at Creation. You might want to know at this point that the Hebrew word for “spirit” is “ruach,” and the translation of it into Greek is “pneuma.” Both words mean “wind” and “breath,” so the Spirit of God comes as wind in Acts and as breath in the Gospel of John. Even more importantly, Jesus lays yet one more gift upon the disciples as he sends them out on their mission: the gift of forgiveness. The forgiveness which he spoke from the Cross is now theirs to give; the new life which he shows by his own resurrection is now theirs to live. By the power of the Spirit given to us in Baptism, those gifts are ours to share, as well, as members of the risen and living Body of Christ. To the extent that we share those gifts faithfully and generously, the world will come to know the reality of Jesus, alive and working today for good in this world. (And boy, do we all need to hear that!)

Matthew and Emma, on this Feast of Pentecost, we welcome you into the community of faith in a God who works wonders in and through us beyond our powers of imagination. Today in this place you will become the newest members of the Jesus Movement! The Easter moment is yours today. In the waters of Baptism, with Jesus, today you will die to sin and rise to new and eternal life; life that cannot be stopped even by the grave. Minutes from now, the Holy Spirit will come upon you and draw you deeply, lovingly into the mission of God who has known you and loved you since long before you were born. You will be sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever, and nothing, *nothing* can ever take that gift away from you.

Matthew and Emma – and all those who celebrate commencement this spring and begin a new life beyond the comfortable walls of school and this church building – let the Holy Spirit be your guide in life. In a world filled with the sins of division, pride, hate, injustice, let the words you speak be those of unity, forgiveness, justice, mercy, peace, and love. When you see or hear your friends bullying or mocking someone else, calling people names, or excluding them from group activities because of their color, their religion, their language, their politics, their physical or mental challenges, it’s OK to say, “I don’t agree with you.” It’s not only OK, it’s important – because that’s the Spirit of God at work in you for wholeness and the salvation of the world. And when they ask you why you disagree with them, say that Jesus did not do those things, and you are a follower of Jesus. Stand up for what Jesus showed his followers to do.

When the whole world seems to be falling apart at the seams, let the Holy Spirit remind you that God *is* still in charge, and *will* work through and for you, and all those of the Jesus Movement, to bring good out of evil, joy out of sorrow, hope out of despair, light out of darkness, life out of death. When you don’t know which way to turn, stop and listen to that still, small voice of the Spirit who speaks in your heart. If the temptation is to choose power, prestige, or greed, the voice you are hearing is probably not the voice of God. When you have been hurt, forgive; when you have hurt someone else, ask their forgiveness. Be the image of Christ to all whom you meet. Do this and the world will be the better for your place in it. Remember always that there is no one that God loves more than you. Fill the world not with the love of power, but with the power of love. Let “Jesus is Lord” be the message which you proclaim both by what you say and what you do.

This is the eternal message of Easter. Let it be yours every day.