

Blowing in the Wind

Pentecost Sunday, May 27, 2012, Jill R. Russell

Texts: Acts 2.1-21; Psalm 104; Romans 8.22-27; John 15.26-27, 16.4b-15

I love the tradition we have on Ascension Sunday to conclude worship with the *Hallelujah Chorus*. I love standing in the back of the sanctuary letting that glorious music wash over me. As I stood there last Sunday I was taken aback by the intensity of emotion that flooded through my soul when the choir sang the passage, “The kingdom of this world Is become the kingdom of our Lord, And of His Christ, and of His Christ; And He shall reign forever and ever.” I felt the urgency of the hope we celebrate on days like Ascension Sunday for this world in which we live to be made whole.

Gordon voiced the questions that come when we make a claim in our worship and in our theology that “God wins and Jesus reigns.”¹ My mind was deeply engaged throughout that sermon wrestling with those questions. During the *Hallelujah Chorus* my heart was opened up to the human suffering that prompts those questions. I was struck by the tense of that phrase....the kingdom of this world Is become...not will become but Is become the kingdom of our Lord And of his Christ.” I was struck too by the tone of that movement. It starts with a quiet defiance that builds into this sweeping definitive claim of faith. When you trust God deep in your bones – when you know that God’s realm and God’s way will endure long after any counter claims have run their course – then you can sing, “the kingdom of this world IS become the kingdom of our Lord And of his Christ.” For that moment standing in the back of the sanctuary I claimed the truth and hope of the *Hallelujah Chorus* on behalf of those who do not feel as if this world is even remotely like the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.

Throughout this week I kept coming back to that space of what it is like when you feel the powerful grip that brokenness and evil and suffering has on this world. What it is like when you cannot choke out the simplest words of faith, let alone claim that kind of defiant trust. I was remembering

¹ This was a phrase from Gordon Wiersma’s sermon on May 20, 2012.

a friend of mine who reflected after her father died that despite the six hundred miles between them and despite her fierce feminism, when her father was alive she felt a protective cover over her and when he died she felt exposed; it required a new calibration of trust to feel ok in the world without him. I suspect the disciples knew something of that feeling of being exposed and vulnerable - just blowing in the wind - after Jesus died. When he was alive, even if they didn't always understand what he was talking about, even if they felt afraid and were being blown completely off course, he was there to give just the right insight and to pull them back in the right direction. After he died they were left alone and for weeks they huddled together, hidden away, sorting it out, voicing their doubts, recalibrating. After Jesus ascended, leaving them all over again, they stood there dumbfounded staring up into the sky, asking all the wrong questions as Gordon pointed out last week.

Until the day of Pentecost when a very different wind begins to blow. This wind would not leave them twisting, confused, and alone. This wind would propel them forward out of hiding and into the streets. Peter finds his voice that day. He is no longer shrinking in shame over his failure of courage but is confident and defiant. He speaks with clarity about the good news entrusted to him that the wind blowing through that place on that day was none other than the Spirit of God. From that moment forward, Peter and all the disciples with him take up the mantle of their calling and step out in faith to boldly share what they have witnessed and experienced in their life with Jesus.

As turning points go this is one for the books. It's hard to know whether the writer of the book of Acts is going for the dramatic effect or whether the disciples truly did turn on a dime. After the day of Pentecost they are full of confidence, they are clear about what God is doing, and they are eager to share what they have received. Reading the opening chapter of Acts you would think that after the day of Pentecost no one ever suffered a crisis of faith again; that it was onward and upward from that day forward. While stories of triumph can be inspiring they can also be intimidating if what you do with those stories is use them as a point of comparison. Thankfully we have the writings of Paul from the book of Romans today. This passage keeps us from reading the experience of the disciples as

simple linear progression: “Once they were traumatized and afraid then they were filled with the Holy Spirit and never again did they experience a moment of doubt or suffering.”

Paul writes quite openly about the continued suffering and questioning that accompanies life in this world. The whole of creation is groaning and “not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait...” If you are among those who are groaning under the strain of your life, if you are in hiding mode trying to sort out exactly where God is in the midst of your struggle, if you are choking on the simplest affirmations of faith -- you are not alone. There are others of us in this community of faith who are right there with you or who have been there before or who will be there again. Paul describes this state of being with such detail. He clearly knows the territory from the inside out. And what he testifies is true: the Spirit helps us in our weakness when we do not know how to pray, interceding with sighs too deep for words. The huddled, hiding disciples were not left to twist in the wind. And neither are we.

The story of Pentecost does mark a turning point in the life of the disciples. And it is worthy of our meditation today to notice that the pathway out of the trauma surrounding Jesus’ death was forged as the Spirit propelled them into action. They found their way as they began to share what they learned at Jesus’ feet, to do what Jesus did – to break bread together – to offer healing to one another – to share of their possessions - to learn to forgive one another. The story of Pentecost paints this picture as a radical turning point. And that is way of it for some of us.

For others of us it is a much more gradual unfolding of placing one foot in front of the other in the direction that Jesus points, trusting that the Spirit will help us in our weakness, intercede for us when we cannot find the words, and help us to trust that we are not alone. In my reading this week I stumbled on a short story by Raymond Carver entitled, “A Small Good Thing.”² It’s a story about a family getting ready to celebrate their son,

² J. Barney Hawkins IV, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 18, references this story....I found the full text on the internet at <http://astoryeveryday.com/2011/10/13/raymond-carver-a-small-good-thing/>

Scotty's, 8th birthday. His mother orders a fancy birthday cake for him but never picks it up because on the morning of his birthday, she learns that he has been hit by a car. The story recounts the agony of this couple as they watch their little boy descend into a coma and eventually die. The baker, not knowing what kept them from taking their delivery that day, keeps calling demanding payment. Eventually they show up with all of their grief and anger in the middle of the night at the bakery. The mother is ready to unleash all of her anguish onto the unsuspecting baker. When he hears that their boy is dead and realizes what a horrible mistake he has made by harassing them, he apologizes profusely, he pulls up two chairs, pours some coffee puts out some freshly baked cinnamon rolls and says, "You probably need to eat something...I hope you'll eat some of my hot rolls. You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this," and then he takes a loaf of bread he's just baked and breaks it and puts it before them and they sit and eat and talk together until the early hours of morning.

The story of Pentecost is the story of God's Spirit poured out on all flesh. It is the beginning of a big story about the good news moving to every corner of the earth. Sometimes we have a big part to play in that grand scheme of God's movement in the world, and sometimes all we can do and all that God requires of us is to reach out for the small, good thing that is right in front of us.

And today that good thing is to eat the bread that is broken and set before us at this table; bread that is broken and given by One who has promised to be with us always even to the end of the earth. So come and eat of this bread, drink of this cup and then go out into the world with your eyes wide open for the next good thing that God's Spirit will place before you. And as we place one foot in front of the other in the direction that Jesus points us – hopefully, eventually, we can all sing with defiant trust, "the kingdom of this world Is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever."

Amen!