

Beyond Wind and Flame

John 15.26-27; 16.4b-7,
13-14; 17.13b (The Message)

Pentecost Sunday
May 31, 2009

We don't pretend to understand the mystery
of what goes on in God's Church.
We just know we feel a pervading spirit of love
that reaches into the niches of all of us
and pulls us into the open,
free and alive and belonging...

We see this Church as a circle of persons
holding hands ...and dancing...
supporting each other, accepting each other,
loving each other.

Each person in this dancing circle
is facing outward ...reaching into God's world...
willing to offer a cup of cold water in His name.

-Ann Weems (adapted from *This Church*)

The Reading

"When the Friend I plan to send you from the Father comes—the Spirit of Truth issuing from the Father—he will confirm everything about me. You, too, from your side must give your confirming evidence, since you are in this with me from the start. I didn't tell you this earlier because I was with you every day. But now I am on my way to the One who sent me. Not one of you has asked, 'Where are you going?' Instead, the longer I've talked, the sadder you've become. So let me say it again, this truth: It's better for you that I leave. If I don't leave, the Friend won't come. But if I go, I'll send him to you. But when the Friend comes, the Spirit of Truth, he will take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is. He won't draw attention to himself, but will make sense out of what is about to happen and, indeed, out of all that I have done and said. He will honor me; he will take from me and deliver it to you. I'm saying these things in the world's hearing so my people can experience my joy completed in them.

Dancing as We Speak

Anyone even slightly familiar with life in the Deep South knows that many of the attitudes and traditions typically attributed to Southerners are simply not true. Take, for example, their reputation for deep frying almost anything. Well ...never mind; that one *is* true.

James R. "Bo" Crowe
Overland Park Christian Church

Shoot; Southerners will deep fry almost anything they can get in the pot: chicken, of course; but also things like pickles or turkeys; whole turkeys, for goodness' sake! It is definitely not true, however, that Southerners are always laid back; that life is somehow slower and more tranquil deep in the heart of Dixie. As a Southerner by birth I can tell you in all honesty that this reputation is only half true. The humidity does grind things almost to a halt in the sweltering summer months, but attitudes are not always as laid back as you might think.

In my neck of the woods, for example, let Alabama lose just one football game and see how relaxed those folks are! Or find yourself a gathering of good Baptists, and see what happens when the conversation strays to the sins of the flesh; you know, things like playing cards, going to the movies, or dancing. They get uptight in a hurry, let me tell you. Dancing is a source of unbridled fear; it is reputed to take you to hell in a hand basket immediately if not sooner. As a matter of fact, I once heard of a pastor who stumbled on two youthful choir members embracing passionately in the sanctuary following choir rehearsal. He was so shocked and appalled that he stormed up to them and said, "For goodness sake, if you're gonna do that at least sit down; somebody might walk in here and think you're dancin'."

I'm joking, of course; nevertheless, dancing is not a very popular activity among some religious folks in the Deep South. Knowing that, I felt a natural reluctance to propose the theme *Join the Dance!* for our Pentecost celebration today. Why, if my Aunt Edna knew that I was responsible for that theme, she would box my ears. I can hear her now, "Dancin' in church; well I never! Bobo, we taught you better than that." Be that as it may, I'll stick by the choice, because the life of faith is – or should be at any rate – a dance of joy! If the Father can dance, as our choir sang; if Christ is Lord of the dance, as we all sang; then we in the faith community can dance for joy.

Let me assure you, I'm not going to spring into dance right here in the chancel. I wouldn't do that for love nor money. I learned my lesson long ago as a teenager. Not long after blowing out a knee in a football injury, I hobbled on crutches to a school dance, where I overheard a friend comment that it might have been a blessing in disguise, my blown knee, because I couldn't dance for nothin'; when I tried, he added, I looked like a scarecrow! I'm not

going to dance; not with my feet anyway. But my heart; my heart is dancing as we speak, because the life of faith is a dance, a true celebration of goodness and joy.

An Overlooked Symbol

We all know the symbols of wind and fire that Luke uses in Acts to symbolize the gift of Spirit and the birth of God's Church. Few of us remember, however, that another symbol plays a significant role in the birth and ongoing life of the Church. John shares this symbol with us in his alternate version of the Church's origin; beyond wind and fire, joy symbolizes the birth of God's Church; sheer, absolute joy! Joy that will be made complete, Jesus promises, in the life of his disciples.

For this reason, and this reason only, we can remind ourselves week after week that if we ain't having fun we're doing something wrong! For this reason, and this reason only, we can remind ourselves week after week that God loves us and there ain't a cotton-pickin' thing we can do about it. The presence of God's Spirit that was promised by Jesus and delivered in spades, guarantees the joy that characterizes, or should characterize, the Church. I'm not so naïve as to think the Church is always characterized by joy. While in seminary, I interviewed for a music ministry position at a local church. I'll never forget the lesson that interview taught me. The search committee was gracious enough to drive to campus and meet me in the lobby of the student dorm. As I made my way from class to the interview, a friend stopped me outside the dorm to warn me not to go near the lobby, because it was occupied. "I know," I responded, "I'm meeting that group for a job interview." His response floored me, "Are you interviewing for a mortuary? That group is nothing if not somber and sad."

That group is nothing if not somber and sad; and the sad truth is, he was right. That search committee was as somber and joyless as any group of people I have ever seen outside of a mortuary. I wanted to ask where they had left their smiles, their happiness, the joy of their faith. It should have been there, you know, because when we open our hearts and lives to God and begin to live the life of faith, we should have an abundance of joy. Think about it; we no longer have to walk alone, because we always walk in God's presence. We no longer have to prove our worthiness to ourselves or anyone else; because self worth is ours as a gift of grace. We no longer have to claw our way to the top of our professions at the expense of others,

because we see in faith that true accomplishment lies not in what we accomplish, but in the love and compassion we share along the way. And we don't have to worry about the storm clouds that come our way in life – clouds that will come our way at some point - because God's image is inscribed so deeply and indelibly in the depths of our hearts that it can never be erased. Paul was right; nothing can ever separate us from the Love of God.

Now, I ask you, where is the fodder for sadness in all this? Where is the motivation to be somber or grumpy? I can't find it in faith; I can't find it in God's Church. Church – the community of faith - should be all about joy; and if you don't find the Spirit of joy at the heart of what's going on in the name of Church, it ain't Church. It ain't Church because God, who is Joy, is the heart, life, and soul of the Church and its mission in the world. That's why we can celebrate not only wind and flame on Pentecost, but as well the joy that is generated by God's presence among us, offering us healing and wholeness, and binding us together in life and love.

When all is said and done, I will risk offending my aunt Edna, or any other of the good folks who take offense at dancing, and will be so bold as to invite you to join the dance; the dance of faith. I will risk the offense, because the faith I know in Christ is a joyful faith; it is indeed a dance of faith! What are its steps? I would suggest three simple steps: to see beauty in all of life, to share love broadly, and to taste the joy known in faith. Simple, are they not? And the best news is that anyone can join in. Shall we dance? Amen.