Pentecost Sunday

*Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart, I will pray.*

I go back to that song often, and I’ll explain why.

My father was a psychiatrist. There is a saying in medicine that one goes into psychiatry because you yourself are crazy or a close family member is crazy. His mother, my paternal grandmother, was very crazy, crazy and mean, the worst kind of crazy. She was also Pentecostal. Through her interpretation of the choices in her life, the Spirit led her to do almost every action she did. If she had had a loving open heart, I might believe she was that intimately connnected to the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately she did not, and  as a young child and then adolescent, her attributing everything to the Spirit, just confused me.

I’m not unique, everyone has some degree of unlearning of their life to make sense of new data.  My parents had found the Episcopal church and they didn’t talk about the Spirit much. I had to leave my grandmother’s interpretation of the Holy Spirit, to make room for what I read in the Bible and what I experienced myself.

*Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart, I will pray.*

There is a theological concept *Communicatio idiomatum*, that all members of the Trinity are present at all times. It is not that one does one action and not the others. It is God in the Godhead, Son and Spirit who in all time creates, saves and sustains each of us. Again, this is conceptually tricky, but if you can think of the Word in Jesus being present in the beginning, so too is the Spirit. How this plays out is confusing… because it is also confusing in the Bible.

Frankly, the Bible is just not always clear about God’s Spirit. It is elusive at times.  Although we kind of seem to know what we mean by the term when we use it. It brings to mind the word “ineffable”—- those things that are just not able to be known about God.   How can God’s Spirit be placed on others from the time of Moses which we heard in our reading from Numbers and yet is received when the crucified and risen Jesus breathes it on his disciples?  The imagery is nevertheless consistent between the members of the Trinity. The *ruak* (translated as spirit or breath) of the Old Testament is breathed into *Adam* in the book of Genesis to make him man from the *adama* of clay. The *pneuma* or breath/ spirit/ life of the Holy Spirit is what Jesus breathes on the disciples.

The Holy Spirit comes on the day of Pentecost in our reading in Acts. The first original celebration of Pentecost is/ was a Jewish wheat harvest festival. So, on this day of Pentecost, there is this strange and wonderful event where everyone can hear and understand all languages and people are able to speak and be understood in languages they don’t know. This was an amazing occurence; this is acutally beyond what is known as glossalalia— what is also known as speaking in tongues. The work of the Spirit is always seen best or only by its fruit.  The conversion and baptism of new members who heard, saw and understood and then who began to follow in the Way of Christ, and thus began the spread of the early church—-this is indeed good, sweet fruit.  And so we can say sincerely Happy Birthday Church!!

*Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart, I will pray.*

Where the challenge and the stretch of being Christian comes in is in the last line of today’s Gospel.  Turn to it with me, in Vietnamese or English.  “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

It is not just that the Spirit can land on you. It is not just that God has already turned your heart and that Christ was crucified and rose for you. The last line of the Gospel gives us some very basic practical words, our marching orders as it were. Christ confronted the authorities when he forgave others their sins. This forgiveness by Jesus had curative effects, whether physical or psychological, but for those who were forgiven, their worlds were made right.  This last line that upon receipt of the Holy Spirit, becomes something that you too can do, you can forgive sins (of yourself or others) and they are then forgiven, or that you can retain these sins, and the sins are then retained.  This is where free will comes in. This is where you can choose whether or not you want to be Christ in the world. With the assistance or work of the Holy Spirit, there is a choice to be made. The Holy Spirit is what allows this to happen should you choose to forgive; this is actually HOW to forgive.

*Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart, I will pray.*

You can’t do this all by yourself, it takes a conversation with God, it takes prayer.  But just imagine the concept that it is possible for you to lay the baggage down of all the hurts that just kind of stick onto you, almost like briars when one walks through the forest, to be able to lay them all down and not preseverate over injuries that you may have, again real or perceived, but instead to leave it all up to God, who is in charge of forgiveness in the grand scheme of things…. This allows you to be a better person to others, even better than that, it allows you to be Christ in the World. This allows your wounds to not have control over your life. The slate CAN be washed clean and the world is ready to be embraced as only you as Christ in the world can do, by acting through the Holy Spirit. This is good sweet, fruit for you and those you forgive.

And now for a not so radical confession, I genuinely struggle with this, I do. In my better moments, I can be pretty good, but those are only my better moments.  Most of the time, I too am so very very human. There are some sins I retain of my own, that I have not forgiven myself and sins of others, that I try, and will continue to try, not to retain. I suspect we may share this trait. And so when the Spirit moves I pray and invite you to pray. …

*Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart, I will pray.*