

“They were all together in one place.” On the day of Pentecost, we meet the inner circle of Jesus’ followers gathered together in an upper room in Jerusalem. According to the text, Jesus has ascended to heaven, leaving his message and the continuation of his ministry in the hands of the disciples. He has told them that in the days to come, they will be baptized in the Holy Spirit. For many years, when I read this text about the disciples being gathered in a room on Pentecost, I had assumed that they were hiding in the room for fear of persecution. The Gospel of John portrays it that way saying that they had locked themselves in the room out of fear. They had every reason to be afraid. Their rabbi had just been executed by the Roman state and the religious authorities of the day were no doubt keeping a close eye on the followers of Jesus. But the text doesn’t actually state that they were afraid or that they were hiding. The disciples may have simply been waiting for the spirit to come as Jesus had indicated.

They were discerning God’s call for them in this new time. I have no doubt that they were nervous about the future and uncertain about their role in it. But once they were filled with the spirit of God, they were inspired to bust out of the safety of the room and preach to anyone and everyone about the wonders of God and the message of Jesus.

Being filled with the spirit is a concept we don’t talk about much in progressive circles. For many people who belong to mainline protestant churches such as ours, the phrase “filled with the Holy spirit” may conjure images of TV evangelists working up their congregation into a frenzy and casting out evil spirits. Or people feverishly speaking in tongues. It’s not that we don’t believe in the Holy Spirit or even have experiences of what we might call “Holy Spirit moments,” but to be *filled* with the Holy Spirit? That concept can feel at odds with our logical, science-respecting, evidence-seeking selves.

So what or who exactly is the Holy Spirit? Asking this question puts us in good company. This intangible and mysterious entity is something that theologians have been wrestling with for thousands of years. Feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson writes, “Spirit-Sophia is the source of transforming energy among all creatures. She initiates

novelty, instigates change, transforms what is dead into new stretches of life.”¹ We might view the Holy Spirit as the way we feel God’s movement in our lives; that divine encouragement and motivation to be our best selves both as individuals and as a community. It is that flutter in our heart or the whisper in our ear that calls us to live into God’s hope for us.

Black Liberation theologian James Cone offers another perspective of the Holy Spirit. He writes, “...as Creator, God identified with oppressed Israel, participating in the bringing into being of this people; as Redeemer, God became the Oppressed One in order that all may be free from oppression; as the Holy Spirit, God continues the work of liberation. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Creator and the Redeemer at work in the forces of human liberation in our society today.” The Spirit of the Creator and the Redeemer at work in the forces of human liberation in our society today.

What both of these perspectives share is the eternal nature of the Holy Spirit. The events of Pentecost didn’t only happen to the followers of Jesus gathered in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, but have been happening throughout history in all the corners of the world, even right here in Brainerd, Minnesota.

Early on in my seminary experience, I heard a classmate refer to the Holy Spirit as “tricksy” with an “s”. Based on the context of our conversation, I took the word “tricksy” to mean unpredictable and something that catches us by surprise. This wasn’t an element of the Spirit that I had considered much. Then later in my studies, reading by Monica Coleman help explain this characteristic of the Holy Spirit for me. She writes about the Womanist concept of “making a way out of no way.”² This concept of making a way out of no way, spoke to me as the creative and unpredictable nature of the Holy Spirit. I experience this when prayers that I have lifted up to God seem to be answered

¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, Tenth Anniversary Edition. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 135.

² Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 12.

in ways I never would have expected or when a problem seems unsolvable until a solution seems to come from out of nowhere.

Sometimes I think that since we don't tend to experience the Holy Spirit in the same manner as those first followers of Jesus gathered in Jerusalem – with sounds like the rush of a violent wind or visions of tongues of fire - we don't recognize the work and presence of the Holy Spirit but instead explain things away as coincidence or gut feelings, or simply our own brilliance and capability. It is more likely that our experiences of the Holy Spirit show up as a pull to do something meaningful even when it's difficult or uncomfortable. She shows up when, as James Cone indicated, people are moved to work for liberation and justice, even when it doesn't benefit them personally.

I think the Holy Spirit might just be at work in the Catholic church right now. Many of you probably read or heard that, after a meeting with 900 women religious at the Vatican, Pope Francis announced that he will create a commission to study the possibility of allowing women to serve as deacons in the Catholic church. This is a huge development that could potentially mean an end to the church's history of all male clergy. This Pope has been more progressive than others on many social issues, but this shift is drastic, and if I may say so, long overdue.

It seems that movements of the Holy Spirit often lead us into places and experiences that push us out of our comfort zone. But as much as the Spirit may lead, we still have to say yes to being led. We have to create a space in ourselves that is open to becoming aware of how the Spirit might be inviting us, and then we have to be willing to follow. This morning, a few of our Confirmation youth were welcomed to the Quaker meeting that gathers on our second floor every Sunday morning. The meeting opened with a reading followed by a time of silence. I thought I would share the reading with you.

This comes from the book *Quaker Faith and Practice* chapter 29-1 and was written by Gordon Matthews...

How can we walk with a smile into the dark? We must learn to put our trust in God and the leadings of the Spirit. How many of us are truly led by the Spirit throughout our daily lives? I have turned to God when I have had a difficult decision to make or when I have sought strength to endure the pain in dark times. But I am only slowly learning to dwell in the place where leadings come from. That is a place of love and joy and peace, even in the midst of pain. The more I dwell in that place, the easier it is to smile, because I am no longer afraid.

If we dwell in the presence of God, we shall be led by the spirit. We do well to remember that being led by the spirit depends not so much upon God, who is always there to lead us, as upon our willingness to be led. We need to be willing to be led into the dark as well as through green pastures and by still waters. We do not need to be afraid of the dark, because God is there. The future of this earth need not be in the hands of the world's 'leaders'. The world is in God's hands if we are led by God. Let us be led by the Spirit. Let us walk with a smile into the dark.³

May it be so.

³ *Quaker Faith and Practice* chapter 29.1 accessed on <http://qfp.quaker.org.uk/chapter/29/>