

**Seabury-Western Theological Seminary
154th Commencement and Holy Eucharist
12 May 2012**

PROPER: Acts 16:1-10; Psalm 100; John 15:18-21

Some of you may be wondering why the readings we have just heard were chosen for this occasion. The answer is quite simple: they are the passages of scripture appointed in the Weekday Eucharistic Lectionary for this particular Saturday within the Great Fifty Days of the Easter.

The Acts of the Apostles which is read daily at the Eucharist during this season is an account of what happens when resurrection is let loose upon the world and the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, as the risen One is named in the Book of Revelation, pushes and pulls, accosts, and, overleaping all boundaries, plunges paws first into the lives and limited vision of the all too human men and women called to be his witnesses. Without warning they become bearers of the provocative news that if anyone is in Christ “there is a new creation, everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!” This is good news, if there is nothing old upon which your security depends holding you back, in which case everything becoming new may appear to be more of a threat than a consolation, requiring, as it does, the poverty of relinquishment in order to make way for the force and flow of resurrection reality.

And so, as the Book of Acts unfolds, we hear of the unrelenting power and presence of the risen Christ in word and Spirit, in dreams and visions. We read that the word of God “continued to spread, to advance, to grow mightily and to prevail.” No dead letter, but “alive and active and sharper than a two-edged sword,” as we are told in the Letter to the Hebrews. At the same time, the Spirit blows freely where the Spirit wills: filling and falling upon the unsuspecting, such as Peter, giving them boldness of speech and action which probably surprised them as much as the people around them – the Spirit holding them captive, over ruling established order and transgressing the limits of religious custom and imagination, all the while bearing witness to the Divine declaration recorded in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my, says the Lord.”

The Spirit and the word are also present as event and occurrence. Words are not simply spoken, they happen, they take place: “the Word became flesh and lived among us,” being the most notable example. And so it is as we follow the path of the word and Spirit through the events recorded in the Acts of the Apostles we again and again run up against things that oblige the apostles to alter their plans or what they perceive to be God’s will.

In today’s reading we are told that the Holy Spirit “forbade” Paul and Timothy to “speak the word in Asia.” We are then informed that the Spirit, now identified as the “Spirit of Jesus,” further impedes their evangelizing efforts by not allowing them to carry the word

into Bithynia. What the events or circumstances might have been that prevented them from following their chosen course remain unknown, but from the view of the “we” who appears at the end of our reading the hindrances that obliged them to change direction and go another way were more than those of human agency, though human agency may well have been involved, they were the direct action of Jesus’ own Spirit.

Sometimes opposition, non-success and or even outright failure which thwart or contradict our noble intentions and desires which, because they are so elevated, must, we believe, accord with God’s own desire – sometimes opposition obliges us to relinquish our plans and go in another direction. To be sure, Paul was helped in altering his course by his vision of the man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” We are seldom given such clear and unambiguous guidance. And yet, guidance there is: Disappointment or frustration that things have not gone our well intentioned way, may be succeeded after a space for reflection by fresh insight that breaks upon us as an unexpected gift and open a new way that corrects and expands our original vision. (The Bexley Hall – Seabury – Western Federation maybe a case in point.) Sometimes the circumstances, which require us to alter course, are themselves revelatory though they may only becomes so as they are lived. After all, there was no Manna for the Children Of Israel in advance of their going out into the wilderness. Then again, guidance may come on the form of an insistent voice of a person – a man of Macedonia - or of a community saying, “Come and help us,” and in so doing show us the way to proceed. Ministry in all its forms and in all orders requires attentiveness, a disposition of the heart that renders us receptive to word and Spirit, the same word and Spirit that animated the lives of the apostles, and through their fidelity mediated the urgent presence and deathless love and power of the risen Christ.

Sometimes a fondly held position, or some seemingly unalterable certitude is contradicted by circumstances that overtake us and requires modification or outright abandonment. Here I think of Paul’s negative view of the practice of circumcision among believers, as a offence against the freedom imparted by Christ, a view expressed forcefully in the Letter to the Galatians, and yet here he is obliging Timothy to be circumcised in order not to impair the hoped for success of his missionary journey. Can we not say that what appeared in this case as contradiction and accommodation, an abandonment of principle, may have been the Spirit inhabiting a particular convergence of circumstances and obliging Paul to respond not in theory, but with an altered perspective. When does our ego and “I am right!” get in the way of the wild and unpredictable motions of the Spirit? “Consider the work of God; who can make straight what he has made crooked,” declares the author of Ecclesiastes. And yet, that is precisely what we so often try and do for our own security and in defense of our presumed rightness.

Here I must admit being consoled by Jesus’ own change of view when confronted by the Canaanite mother who refused to take no for an answer. Was she, perhaps the agent of the same Spirit who bore down upon Jesus at his baptism, now seeking to broaden his perception of his ministry, which until then he had understood as extending “only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel?” What challenges to your own certitudes and firmly

held theological opinions may the Spirit of Jesus have in store for each of you in the course of present ministries, or ministries yet to unfold? This is a question I, even at my vast age, keep constantly before me.

“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” We heard these words of Jesus last Sunday, and again on Wednesday. They stand at the beginning of the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John. The consequence of abiding in Christ is spelled out toward the end of the chapter and is set before us in the Gospel reading for today. Intimacy with Christ, realized through a stance of continual availability to word and Spirit, forms Christ in us such that the Spirit of Jesus and our own spirit become one. This is a lifelong process of interior growth and discovery. Paul speaks about being conformed to the image of God’s Son, and of having the mind of Christ. But, as today’s reading makes plain, our intimate union with and likeness to Christ opens us to same possibility of rejection and hostility that Jesus had to face. “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also.” What Jesus is saying is that intimacy with him is costly. And yet, it is not a cost we bear alone: “Abide in me as I abide in you.” It is in this mutual abiding deepened and matured through our continuing “in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers,” as we affirm in the baptismal covenant, and our constant turning back to Christ when we have fallen away, that the Spirit of Christ is able to indwell and transfigure our humanity – imperfections, “thorns” and all – and make us beyond our wildest imaginings bearers and embodiments of his healing, reconciling and truth revealing presence.

Evagrius Ponticus declared many centuries ago that a theologian is “one who prays.” And it is through prayer and prayerful living that theology – talk about God – descends from the mind into the heart and becomes our natural speech and the source of what scripture and tradition calls wisdom: a kind of deep interior knowing worked in us by the Spirit. It is precisely this kind of depth and spiritual authenticity that that those who knock and those who seek yearn for in this broken and conflict ridden world into which God sent the Word whom we know as the risen One, the True Vine, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Wisdom of God from whose store the Spirit of truth continues to draw the “many more things” the Word seeks to impart.

My brothers and sisters, limbs of Christ’s risen body, reflecting different areas of accomplishment as well as care and oversight: May the word and Spirit in the days ahead be your constant guide and goad opening and, at times, altering the way before you; May Christ, the true vine enliven and sustain you that you may bear much fruit. And may you be given the courage and patience and companionship of the One who endured hostility against himself when your fidelity becomes an offence to others. And may God’s power at work within you and your ministries do infinitely more than you can ask of imagine. Amen. Alleluia.

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