

Date: May 31, 2009

Title: The Spirit Makes Us Human

Scripture:

The Man and Woman in Eden

When the LORD God made the heavens and the earth, ⁵ there were no plants or grain growing on the earth, for the LORD God had not sent any rain. And no one was there to cultivate the soil. ⁶ But water came up out of the ground and watered all the land. ⁷ And the LORD God formed a man's body from the dust of the ground and breathed into it the breath of life. And the man became a living person. Gen 2:4-7 (NLT)

That evening, on the first day of the week, the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! "Peace be with you," he said. ²⁰ As he spoke, he held out his hands for them to see, and he showed them his side. They were filled with joy when they saw their Lord! ²¹ He spoke to them again and said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² Then he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you refuse to forgive them, they are unforgiven." John 20:19-23 (NLT)

Does everybody know what day today is? It's Pentecost Sunday! Now I know that Pentecost Sunday is not one of those easy to remember holidays because we never see "Pentecost" merchandise in the supermarket. About August, we begin to see Christmas decorations so there is no way for us to forget that Christmas is coming. Easter candy reminds us that Easter is coming, but I have yet to go into Wal-Mart and see an aisle devoted to Pentecost Sunday.

I guess that is because Pentecost would be pretty hard to secularize. I mean, Pentecost is as spiritual a day as you could possibly have. On Pentecost Sunday we remember how the Holy Spirit was given to the church. This is often considered the birthday of the church. Let me just say it, then, "Happy Birthday, church!"

When we think of Pentecost, usually we tend to think of the account in the book of Acts that comes in the 2nd chapter. This is the story of all the people praying and worshiping when a noise like a violent wind came into their midst and tongues of fire came down on everybody's head and then people started speaking in a language that everybody understood and about 3,000 people became disciples that day. That is the account Luke gives us in the book of Acts. It's spectacular, it's powerful, it's amazing and there is nothing subtle about it.

But in the book of John, we get a different account of Jesus imparting the Holy Spirit. This one is much more subdued and you can almost miss it if you don't pay attention. There is no big wind, there are no tongues of fire. People don't start speaking in common languages.

Jesus is visiting his disciples on the first Easter Sunday. The disciples are... hiding, actually. The image that comes to my mind is a room full of disciples with the stuffing pretty well

kicked out of them. They are afraid, they are confused, they are probably exhausted; not physically dead, but pretty lifeless all the same. Then Jesus appears to his disciples and simply says, "*Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*"²² Then he *breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."* In two short sentences Jesus breathes new life into these half dead disciples and gives them a purpose that takes them right out of their depression and puts them on a mission from God. Jesus says, "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*" They are commissioned and empowered one right after the other.

Now, this is not the first time this sort of thing happens in the scripture. The first time this happens is when Adam is being created. God takes a few handfuls of mud and shapes it into the form of a man and then God breathes life into the mud. What began as a lifeless lump of clay has been enlivened by the spirit of God.

This is different from the animals. The text says that they too were formed out of the ground, but God did not specifically **breath**e life into them. The animals came alive; they were created, but not with the same result as the creation of Adam. God shaped Adam's body and then gave the shape life by breathing the divine spirit into it. And the scripture says, "And the man became a living person." Adam became a human being. He resembled the animals in many respects, but with the breath of God in him, (translated also as the Spirit of God) he became a human being. He became a human being because he had been blessed with the very breath of God.

Do you know what the word "spirit" means? In the Hebrew language, Spirit and Breath are the same word. So the breath of God is the Spirit of God. And when we receive the spirit of God, we begin to live, not simply as the animals live but as human beings who care about God and care about each other. When we receive the spirit of God we are able to experience empathy and genuine love. We are able to see beyond our own needs to the needs of others. Our purpose extends far beyond the survival of our own species, our purpose is to spread God's love throughout the entire planet.

John Powell, Professor, Loyola University in Chicago tells the story of one of his students named Tom. Tom came to class the first day with shoulder length hair at a time when long hair was very unusual. Professor Powell accepted Tom but labeled him with an "s" for strange. He writes:

Tommy turned out to be the "atheist in residence" in my Theology of Faith course. He constantly objected to, smirked at, or whined about the possibility of an unconditionally loving Father/God. We lived with each other in relative peace for one semester, although I admit he was for me at times a serious pain in the back pew.

When he came up at the end of the course to turn in his final exam, he asked in a cynical tone, "Do you think I'll ever find God?"

I decided instantly on a little shock therapy. "No!" I said very emphatically. Why not," he responded, "I thought that was the product you were pushing."

I let him get five steps from the classroom door and then called out, "Tommy! I don't think you'll ever find Him, but I am absolutely certain that He will find you!" He shrugged a little and left my class and my life. I

felt slightly disappointed at the thought that he had missed my clever line — He will find you! At least I thought it was clever.

Later I heard that Tommy had graduated and I was duly grateful. Then a sad report came. I heard that Tommy had terminal cancer. Before I could search him out, he came to see me. When he walked into my office, his body was very badly wasted and the long hair had all fallen out as a result of chemotherapy. But his eyes were bright and his voice was firm, for the first time, I believe. “Tommy, I’ve thought about you so often. I hear you are sick,” I blurted out.

”Oh, yes, very sick. I have cancer in both lungs. It’s a matter of weeks.”

”Can you talk about it, Tom?” I asked.

”Sure, what would you like to know?” he replied.

”What’s it like to be only twenty-four and dying?”

”Well, it could be worse.”

”Like what?”

”Well, like being fifty and having no values or ideals, like being fifty and thinking that booze, seducing women, and making money are the real ‘biggies’ in life.”

I began to look through my mental file cabinet under “S” where I had filed Tommy as strange. (It seems as though everybody I try to reject by classification, God sends back into my life to educate me.)

”But what I really came to see you about,” Tom said, “is something you said to me on the last day of class.” He continued, “I asked you if you thought I would ever find God and you said, ‘No!’ which surprised me. Then you said, ‘But He will find you.’ I thought about that a lot, even though my search for God was hardly intense at that time.”

”But when the doctors removed a lump from my groin and told me that it was malignant, that’s when I got serious about locating God. And when the malignancy spread into my vital organs, I really began banging bloody fists against the bronze doors of heaven. But God did not come out. In fact, nothing happened. Did you ever try anything for a long time with great effort and with no success? You get psychologically glutted, fed up with trying. And then you quit.

Well, one day I woke up, and instead of throwing a few more futile appeals over that high brick wall to a God who may be or may not be there, I just quit. I decided that I didn’t really care about God, about an after life, or anything like that. I decided to spend what time I had left doing something more profitable. I thought about you and your class and I remembered something else you had said, ‘The essential sadness is to go through life without loving. But it would be almost equally sad to go through life and leave this world without ever telling those you loved that you had loved them.’“

”So, I began with the hardest one, my Dad. He was reading the newspaper when I approached him. ‘Dad.’“

”Yes, what?” he asked without lowering the newspaper.

”Dad, I would like to talk with you.”

”Well, talk.”

”I mean ... It’s really important.”

The newspaper came down three slow inches. “What is it?”

”Dad, I love you. I just wanted you to know that.”

Tom smiled at me and said it with obvious satisfaction, as though he felt a warm and secret joy flowing inside of him.

”The newspaper fluttered to the floor. Then my father did two things I could never remember him ever doing before. He cried and he hugged me. We talked all night, even though he had to go to work the next morning. It felt so good to be close to my father, to see his tears, to feel his hug, to hear him say that he loved me.”

"It was easier with my mother and little brother. They cried with me, too, and we hugged each other, and started saying real nice things to each other. We shared the things we had been keeping secret for so many years. I was only sorry about one thing — that I had waited so long. Here I was, just beginning to open up to all the people I had actually been close to."

"Then, one day I turned around and God was there. He didn't come to me when I pleaded with Him. I guess I was like an animal trainer holding out a hoop, 'C'mon, jump through. C'mon, I'll give You three days, three weeks.' Apparently God does things in His own way and at His own hour. But the important thing is that He was there. He found me! You were right. He found me even after I stopped looking for Him."

"Tommy," I practically gasped, "I think you are saying something very important and much more universal than you realize. To me, at least, you are saying that the surest way to find God is not to make Him a private possession, a problem solver, or an instant consolation in time of need, but rather by opening to love. You know, the Apostle John said that. He said: 'God is love, and anyone who lives in love is living with God and God is living in him.' Tom, could I ask you a favor? You know, when I had you in class you were a real pain. But you can make it all up to me now. Would you come into my present Theology of Faith course and tell them what you have just told me? If I told them the same thing it wouldn't be half as effective as if you were to tell them."

"Ooh. I was ready for you, but I don't know if I'm ready for your class."

"Tom, think about it. If and when you are ready, give me a call. In a few days Tom called, said he was ready for the class, he wanted to do that for God and for me. So we scheduled a date. However, he never made it. He had another appointment, far more important than the one with my class and me. Of course, his life was not really ended by his death, only changed. He made the great step from faith into vision. He found a life far more beautiful than the eye of man has ever seen or the ear of man has ever heard or the mind of man has ever imagined. Before he died, we talked one last time.

"I'm not going to make it to your class," he said.

"I know, Tom."

"Will you tell them for me? Will you ... tell the whole world for me?"

"I will, Tom. I'll tell them. I'll do my best."

John Powell, Professor, Loyola University in Chicago

Without the spirit of God in our hearts, our lives can resemble lifeless lumps of clay. This is probably not like any of your lives but it's true that some people just get up every morning; go through pretty much the same motions every day. They eat they work, they sleep, they eat, they work, they sleep until eventually their heart stops pumping for one reason or other and their body goes back to the dust from which it was created. Or, it's true that some people can become so embittered that their whole life is reduced to getting even. Or some people can become so greedy that life is no more than accumulation of stuff. Without the Spirit of God in our hearts, life can be a very busy activity filled waist of time. With the Spirit of God in our hearts, life can be filled with divine love and a blessing to all.

Folks, we were created to love; love God and love each other. When our lives move in a direction that is different from that for which we were created, we lose track of our humanity and our lives begin to resemble lifeless lumps of clay.

And this was where the disciples were just before Jesus came to them. They didn't realize it but they had exchanged places with Jesus. Just as he was leaving the tomb, they were

moving into the tomb of fear, disappointment, confusion, loneliness, anger, and shame. They had completely lost their way.

So, Jesus came to them. As they were hiding in that room (that was acting as their tomb) he came into their presence and offered to infuse their fear-filled, confused, guilt-ridden lives with peace, power, and purpose.

And we know what happened don't we? With the Spirit of God in their hearts, they came alive! Just like God breathed life into Adam when he was just a lifeless lump of clay, Jesus breathed life into the souls of the disciples and they too became "living persons." They opened the doors behind which they had been hiding, they went from town to town spreading the message of hope and the love of Christ to all the world. No longer were they intimidated by religious leaders or political rulers. No longer were they plagued by guilt or shame or confused by Jesus' actions. Because, now.... they were disciples of the living Christ, empowered by Holy Spirit of God. Now that they had received the Spirit of God, they were not just living, they were living human beings loving each other, loving others and working together to bring Glory to God.

And so, today, approximately 2,000 years later, because the Spirit of God still loves this wonderful creation, God is here in this room offering peace, power and purpose to every one of us. This morning I am inviting us all to open ourselves up to the Holy Spirit of God so we can invite God's Spirit to mingle with our Spirit; God's breath to mingle with our breath.

Now, you may have already done this at some point in your life. Or, this may be something that you have considered but avoided for some time. Either way, I want to invite you to take a moment here toward the end of this service to open your heart and invite the Spirit of God to come into your heart. You may want to come kneel at our altar rail or you may want to sit quietly in your seat. You may want to raise your hands to Jesus in an act of surrender. As we (*sing our hymn of commitment /celebrate communion*) let us invite the Spirit of God to come into this church and into our hearts so that like the Adam and like disciples we can move from merely living, breathing organisms to loving giving *human* beings.

Let us pray: O gracious God, please make us more fully human. Enliven each one of our hearts with your Spirit and give us the desire and the will to spread your love and mercy throughout the world. Lord, even as you transform us as individuals, bind us together to act as your church so that we may be able to accept your infinite blessing and pass it on to others. Amen.