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“The Mystery of Transformation”

**A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
Pentecost Sunday (Year C)**

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Genesis 11:1–9; Psalm 104:24–34; Acts 2:1–21

When I woke up “unfrozen” from my shoulder surgery at Duke two months ago,

I found myself attached to three devices:

an ice machine wrapped around my right shoulder to prevent swelling,

a TENS unit attached to the same shoulder, which gave regular, mild

electric shocks to the area to offset any pain,

and a medicine ball connected to a catheter inserted in my neck

through which a nerve block was administered,

numbing my whole right shoulder and arm.

I woke up feeling like I had just had an extreme experience at the dentist!

Not only were my mouth, lips, and right side of my face numb,

but my whole right shoulder and arm felt like dead rubber.

And swallowing and breathing was a little tricky as well.

But I tried to put a good face on it because, after all, I was not hurting,

which was the intended goal of all the apparatuses.

However, the next morning, as I was preparing to be discharged,

one of the anesthesiologists entered with a giant syringe filled with clear fluid

in one hand pointed towards the ceiling like a loaded gun

with her other fist dug defiantly into her hipbone.

And she said, “I’ve come to administer your nerve block bolus before you go home.”

Now I have to admit that I was in something of a fog because some of that

numbing medicine must have seeped into my brain as well.
However, I found myself flipping quickly through my passive vocabulary
trying to recall what "bolus" meant,
although it didn't look good from where I sat.
She continued her instruction: "Should you discover, when you get home,
that your lips become numb, or your face, or you have any trouble swallowing
or breathing, please give us a call or come into the emergency room."

Yikes! Now I was fully alert.

"But I already have all of those symptoms," I said.

"My face is numb. My lips are tingly. I'm having trouble swallowing,
and it's causing me to cough."

And she leaned in, made eye contact with me for the first time, and snipped,
"Well, then... no booster for you!"

I suddenly realized what bolus meant
and just how close I had come to dodging a big one
that might have numbed me down to my toes!

For some reason, I find myself reliving this incident of the bolus
at this turning point in the life of our church
as our shepherd of 33 years has left the sheep in charge of one another.

I keep rolling this incident around in my mind, if truth be told,
because part of me would rather be totally numb right now,
from head to toe, in the aftermath of Joe's departure.

Part of me would rather be numb to the grief of his being gone,
numb to the anxiety, juggling, and jockeying that lies ahead
with the task of discerning the nature of our congregation's
identity and mission without him,
numb to the pain that the process of transformation will entail as
we move through healing, towards wholeness and restoration.

And I as look at today's story of Pentecost, I wonder if the disciples felt the same way, too.
I wonder if they secretly hoped the promised gift of the Holy Spirit

would be a big bolus of numbness that would give them time to cope
with the final departure of Jesus at his ascension.

And I wonder if they were surprised at what they got instead at Pentecost:

not a shot of numbness, but a swift kick in the pants of get going, move forward,
time is short, life is precious, pick up your pity pallet and walk on,
O people of God, because... I am with you, still.

The mystery of the transformation of the early church is the story of Pentecost.

There are clues here as to what we later disciples might expect

if we allow ourselves to observe those first disciples

and learn from their experience of Jesus as Spirit,

Jesus' Spirit as presence in his absence,

Jesus' Spirit as power from on high, Jesus' Spirit as God with us, still.

Three things are particularly interesting to me from that first fiery burst of Spirit

as it continues to shed light on us as church today.

The first is the issue of *togetherness*.

During the fifty days since Passover with Jesus among them,

with Jesus leaving them in death,

with Jesus returning to be with them after the resurrection,

and with Jesus leaving them again in ascension,

the early disciples must have been emotionally exhausted, don't you think?

And now, in the ten days since the ascension,

the community of believers, some 120 of them, men and women,

remain in Jerusalem as Jesus has requested

to receive the promised gift which will enable and empower

them to continue the tasks of ministry begun by Jesus

beginning in Jerusalem and expanding outward from there.

Some things will be continued from their time when Jesus was bodily with them,

and some things will be discontinued without Jesus himself present.

They don't know, at this point, which tasks will be keepers and which tasks will be history.

Theirs will be the difficult task of discernment as they stay together, all together
as Luke tells us, for ten long days – and it could perhaps be more.

And so they wait. And so they wait, **all together**.

And so they wait **all together**, constantly in prayer, **in one place**.

They don't hurry the process: the gift of the Holy Spirit is not something they can control
or manipulate; it comes at God's directive, not theirs.

They don't scatter: they resist the tendency to flee and fly the coop.

They keep their solemn assembly intact,
their beloved community gathered in one place.

They wait in Jerusalem, anxious yet patient, not knowing exactly what to expect,
but trusting in Jesus' promised gift of the Holy Spirit.

Anxiety and patience are difficult qualities to hold onto simultaneously, yet they did.

As for us, it may take great patience to wait for the Holy Spirit to move in our midst, too.

Do you think we can keep vigil together as they did, in prayer as one body,
as one beloved community, made up of a diverse population?

Do you think all the people we claim to welcome in our mission statement:

young and old, black, white and yellow, Kenyans, Koreans, and Americans,
men and women, gay and lesbian, rich and poor
can manage to wait patiently, all together, in one place?

Do you think we can resist the temptation to flee and fly the coop, to seek places
where things might be a little more settled, where life might seem a little more stable,
where leadership is a constant and not a variable?

I think it is an exciting time for our congregation, but not everyone feels that way.

Some would rather be numb to the anticipation that accompanies waiting.

But the early believers stuck it out as one body, one people

together, waiting for God to act. And in their waiting, they discovered unity.

The second interesting point is the issue of *voice*.

When the gift of the Holy Spirit descended upon those patient early believers,
it came with unimaginable liveliness and chaos, like the rush of a mighty wind,

like tongues of fire dancing on their heads,
with a wild Babel of languages spoken all at once, yet understandable to all.
I heard a story on NPR a few weeks ago about a young woman, Caroline Shaw,
who won this year's Pulitzer Prize for music at age 30,
the youngest person ever to receive this award.

Shaw won the Pulitzer for a composition written for her a cappella group,
Roomful of Teeth, called *Partita for Eight Voices*.

She said the piece was inspired by the paintings of artist Sol LeWitt, which
are bright fluorescent pieces, each taking up a whole wall.

At one point in *Partita for Eight Voices*, you hear a swell of jumbled,
indecipherable spoken chatter that eventually resolves into one beautiful
harmonious chord.

Caroline Shaw says of her composition:

"It's funny, my first thought was, wow, that's what the Internet sounds like
when you open your computer and everyone's talking suddenly.

But I was really wanting to hear the sound of jumbled talking, where you can't
understand what's going on – then suddenly, there's one beautiful, simple chord."

(Scott Simon, NPR, interview with Caroline Shaw, April 20, 2013)

When I heard that snippet of her composition on NPR in my car that day,
I thought to myself, "She imagines that's what the Internet sounds like;
I imagine that's what Pentecost must have sounded like,
like a roomful of teeth morphing into one beautiful sound."

Do you think the Holy Spirit coming upon a people like us will enable us
to hear and understand one another with the clarity of one voice, too?

We may gather here in one place like the Internet, channeling many different
voices from various backgrounds of experience, and various likes and dislikes,
some voicing hopes that our future church look nostalgically like their home church,
some voicing desires that our future church look radically different.

Sometimes it would be easier to be numb than to open ourselves to neighbors
who imagine church to be something different than our own personal

wants, needs and expectations!

It can be a painful exercise to listen and try to understand one another without being judgmental or dismissive. I'm not sure that I do it particularly well. But through the gift of the Spirit, perhaps we will begin to listen and to understand where everyone is coming from and yet, against all odds, find consensus. If you listen to the words that Caroline Shaw uses to describe her prize-winning composition, you hear dynamic words: bright, fluorescent, whole-wall, inspired, swell, brave, creative, cacophonous, jumbled, orchestrated, one beautiful, simple chord.

The language of the early church under the influence of the Holy Spirit is like that, too. It's not the language of numbness. It's the language of dynamism: sudden, rush, violent, filled, fire, speak, amazed, bewildered, standing, pour out, all flesh, prophesy, visions, dreams, portents, glorious.

It all resolves into that one beautiful, simple word: glorious.

So may it be with us.

And lastly, there is the issue of *service and sacrifice*.

The coming of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of God with us, still at Pentecost inspired the believers to great acts of service and sacrifice. Peter, the disciple who experienced a professional failure in his denial of Jesus, stands and delivers a beautiful extemporaneous sermon, the first of many such inspired speeches, and goes on to perform many acts of miraculous healing and ecclesial fortitude in the name of Jesus.

He is mysteriously transformed into a leader who is positive, bold, and brave.

Transformation is not a goal that can be achieved through human effort.

It is a mystery and a gift that requires total dependence upon God's grace.

It takes into account our road blocks, discouragements, weaknesses, failures and tragedies, yet enables progress through God's power alone, not ours.

Abba Matta El-Meskeen, a contemporary Egyptian monastic, says this:

"If honey, which is transient food, warms the human body,

how much more will God *enkindle a person's whole spiritual being*,
so that he or she feels *a divine fire raging within...* instilling in a
person the earnest yearning for the kingdom of heaven...
spurring him or her on to service and sacrifice for others."

(David G. R. Keller, *Desert Banquet*, p. 83)

I was captivated last month by the heroism of one respondent to the bombings in Boston.
This man's name was Tyler Dodd, an unemployed, recovering alcoholic,
who found himself a bystander at the finish line of the Boston marathon
when the bombs went off.

As some fled the scene in the chaotic moments following the explosions,
Dodd was drawn towards the chaos into one of the Red Cross tents
where he helped calm and treat one badly injured young female victim.

When Piers Morgan interviewed Dodd on CNN on the evening of April 17,
Dodd fumbled some in his speech, said that he told the woman
that he had served in Afghanistan, which wasn't true,
that he showed her a scar he had received from combat shrapnel,
which wasn't true, either.

One might question this man's integrity, just as some might have questioned Peter's
integrity after his series of flat-out denials, and rightly so.

But overall, Dodd did the right thing, didn't he?

You have to admire anyone who will run into a dangerous crisis and offer help.
Dodd admitted to Piers Morgan that he didn't really know
where the knowledge to help this victim came from, that it just happened,
which I do find credible.

Dodd said, "What I took away... is that... I saw humanity at its finest.

I saw people of all different cultural backgrounds and nationalities
helping each other in a terrible, terrible time...
the human spirit truly rising above what had happened.

And it was an amazing thing to be a part of."

(Tyler Dodd, Interview with Piers Morgan, CNN, April 17, 2013)

This also struck me as a Pentecost moment, when the power of the Holy Spirit
 “enkindled a person's whole spiritual being,” as Abba El-Meskeen might say,
 and “spurred him or her on to service and sacrifice for others.”
I don't know if Dodd is a Christian, although he did admit to being a very spiritual person.
 But what he did that day certainly seemed to arise from a Spirit-enkindled
 place in his soul.

We may not perform perfectly as we move forward in our life together as a congregation.
 We may be riddled with blemishes, little white lies, weaknesses, and outright failures.
But through the power of the Holy Spirit, mysteriously we will be transformed
 as a body, as a congregation, as the people of God continuing the mission of God.
“What the gospel does is confront our version of our story
 with God's version of our story,” says author Rob Bell. (Rob Bell. *Love Wins*, p. 171)
Pentecost is about being overshadowed and overwhelmed with God's version of our
 story and allowing the Holy Spirit to reshape us, to redirect us, to transform us.
If we open ourselves to being “enkindled” by the Spirit and to being motivated
 by “the divine fire raging within,” we will not be numb to the world,
 but fully alive as agents of Jesus' neighbor-loving care and action.
 So may it be. Happy Birthday, Church. Amen.