**The Gifts of the Spirit: Chaos and Capacity**

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I learned many new words during my years in seminary. But my favorite was: pneumatomachi. Anyone want to guess what it means?

Pneumatomachi are not, in fact, Japanese key-chain-pets from the mid 1990’s (those were called Tamagachi). The word in fact is not Japanese at all, it’s Greek. Pneuma means “spirit” or “ghost” in greek, and tomachi meant something similar to “fighter” or combatant. Together, pnematomachi means “spirit-fighters”. They were actually a group of Christians in fourth century who denied that the Holy Spirit was truly a part of God. They believed that the Godhead consisted only of the Father and the Son – the Holy Spirit was some kind of after-thought, not itself divine. The Pneumatomachi were only the first of many groups through the centuries of Christian history to devalue the role of the Holy Spirit within our faith – to attempt to build a life of faith that either excluded or at least seriously minimized the role of the Holy Spirit.

As today is the Day of Pentecost – the day we celebrate God the Holy Spirit – I’ve been pondering this week why I value the Holy Spirit in my own life of faith. I *feel* as though I do value it – I’m not a closet penumatomachian – but it hasn’t been particularly easy to put words to this feeling.

The Holy Spirit is not easily understood. Unlike the Father or the Son, which offer clear images of the first two persons of God’s holy trinity, the “Holy Spirit” or “Holy Ghost” actively resists such person-like images. The Gospels offers us the icon of a dove in certain places. And yes, it is easy to love a dove, but a gentle bird hardly does justice to the power and strength of the Holy Spirit. The dove also serves to reinforce the pneumatomachian idea that the Holy Spirit is something “sent” by God to us, rather than God’s own very self among us. As if the Holy Spirit were an optional add-on to the life of faith, rather than a central component.

Today’s image of the Holy Spirit from the Acts of the Apostles: the tongues of fire, is better. It still suggests that the Holy Spirit is derivative from God rather than God itself. But fire at least captures something of the Spirit’s power, it’s volatility and uncontrollability. Fire is also contagious – it can spread easily and grow into something both magnificent and terrifying, just like the Spirit of God. And it can be an element that serves both the purposes of creation and of destruction – which we know has been true about God throughout the Bible.

This is starting to feel like a more meaningful way of understanding God the Holy Spirit – and yet, I think it is also why the Holy Spirit often gets short shrift, not just in terms of the development of theology, but in the lives of faithful Christian people like you and me. God the Holy Spirit is a destabilizing force. It doesn’t respect the status quo. It is the dimension of God that looks beyond what is to what might become – and works in, through, around, and sometimes in spite of us to bring that vision into being. It is a threat to established authority and those in control, and it is a source of hope for those whom the powerful have forgotten, ignored or victimized.

For better or for worse, I would venture to guess that most of us in this room most of the time prefer stability to chaos. So we tend to value the dimensions of our faith that promote stability rather than chaos. And, as a result, we either ignore, minimize, or domesticate our understanding of God the Holy Spirit into a divine voice that continually sanctifies our own sense of self and the goodness of what is familiar to us. While this can feel good for a little while, it is often the result of subconsciously assigning an overly judgmental and condemning tone to the other persons of the Trinity – who are just as capable of the unconditional love and acceptance that many of us feel is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But I’d suggest that God the Holy Spirit has some other gifts to offer us as well. Because the same God who creates beautiful and life-giving order out of chaos, also repeatedly disrupts that order when in the name of stability our order has become complacent, self-focused, or a source of oppression. All those Old Testament stories about floods and plagues and foreign armies and Job’s trials – in some way they all seem to me attempts to express the destabilizing dimension of God. After all, as the writer Annie Lamott likes to say, “God loves us just as we are, but God loves us too much to let us stay that way.” This destabilizing God finds its fullest expression in our claim that God is Holy Spirit: the one who troubles the waters of our lives, the one who brings the refiner’s fire to our pride, the one who inspires our souls for transformation.

Do *you* pray often to *this* God, the Holy Spirit? When you hear the words “Let us pray,” do you imagine that your prayers are heard by the God who is a tongue of fire? When you think of the Holy Spirit, do you imagine the God who longs to burn away that within us which is no longer needed, and to fuel within us capacities we never imagined possible?

On the Day of Pentecost that our first reading today recalled, the disciples were together, and it was already a time of chaos. Jesus had died, risen back to earth to be again with his disciples, and then ascended into heaven, leaving them behind. And now they were waiting, unsure of what to do next as they awaited the Holy Spirit. Sometimes I wonder if they were expecting a dove. But what they got literally, was a fire lit under them! The chaos that life had already dealt them was about to be made even more chaotic by God’s presence among them. The cacophony of our reading today pales in comparison to the bizarre spectacle of speaking in strange tongues and comprehending nonetheless. But God the Holy Spirit doesn’t bring chaos without also bringing capacity. The Holy Spirit doesn’t destabilize the present order because God desires chaos. The Holy Spirit upends our stability because God has a new kind of stability in store for us: more loving, more faithful, more just, more holy. Though the Holy Spirit certainly left these first disciples even more confused – so much so that those around them believed them drunk – the Spirit also inspired them with new capacities to communicate that would lead them into the new order that God dreamed of for them: the creating of new communities rooted in faith and hope and love and justice.

When we think about praying to the Holy Spirit, we too can expect that the outcome will yield both chaos and capacity. We should not delude ourselves into thinking that God the Holy Spirit is some source of perfect calm, like a benign tropical breeze. Rather God the Holy Spirit is the breath of God, a holy wind that whirls through the chaos that exists already in our lives and empowers us with the capacity to minister amidst that chaos as we bring a new and holier order to our lives and to the world. The journey from chaos to new order is never easy, but walking that road together is the experience of what it means to be faithful lovers and followers of God.

I leave you on this Feast Day with the words of a former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple. He had a very short tenure in that office but it was a tumultuous time during the second world war – some of the ugliest chaos the world had ever seen. Here is what Archbishop Temple had to say about praying to God the Holy Spirit. I find them challenging, comforting, and empowering, all at the same time.

When we pray “Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire” we had better know [that] He will not carry us to easy triumphs and gratifying successes; more probably he will set us to some task for God in the full intention that we shall fail, so that others, learning wisdom by our failure, may carry the good cause forward. He may take us through loneliness, desertion by friends, apparent desertion even by God…. He may drive us into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. …If we invoke him, it must be to help us in doing God’s will not ours…. The soul that is filled with the Spirit must have become purged of pride or love of ease,…. but that soul has found the only real dignity, the only lasting joy. Come then, Great Spirit, come. Convict the world and convict my timid soul.