

Pentecost 2008 The Holy Spirit, the Church and the World
1 Corinthians 12:4-13

What preparation I did for this morning's sermon was done for the nonexistent 7th Sunday of Easter rather than for Pentecost, so you're going to get a bit of an extempore presentation, a mixture of things which struck my attention since I discovered my error – sometime between the opening dialogue and the collect of the day.

The first is in the text of Hymn #225 (*Hail thee, festival day!* Pentecost Version), in vs. 2. It's right underneath the second double set of those awful, awful quarter note triplets, which disturb the rhythmical sense of practically all congregations. "Forth from the Father he comes with seven-fold mystical offering, pouring on *all human souls* the infinite riches of God . . ."

In the light of that statement I find some traditional attitudes toward the Holy Spirit peculiar. There is no sign here of limiting the gifts of the Spirit to the life of the church. "All human souls" receive them, not all baptized souls or church going souls or tithing souls. And the fellow who wrote the text is no young spring chicken influenced by crazy modernism. Venantius Honorius Fortunatus probably, but we're not sure, living between 540 -600 AD. (That's according to *The Hymnal 1983*. According to the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church he lived, probably, 530-610. What's 20 years, more or less?) Clearly, we don't know much about him except that he wrote glorious Latin hymns. (He also wrote saints' lives, laments, epigrams and epitaphs. The likelihood is that you'll never be exposed to them. He eventually became bishop of Poitiers.) So, we have here a very ancient text that does not see the gifts of the Spirit as something confined to the church – and that text is by a bishop, a friend of St. Gergory of Tours and the author of several other hymns in our hymnal: *The flaming banners of our king* #161,162; *Sing my tongue the glorious battle* #165,166; the versions of *Hail thee, festival day* for Easter #175, Ascension #216, Pentecost, #225 and the hymn *Welcome, happy morning* #179. The indications point to a person of trustworthy orthodoxy.

This insight that the gift of the spirit is to "all human souls" begins to give to us a sense of what we're about as the church that is, perhaps, a bit different from the commonly accepted. If the Holy Spirit is, as Fortunatus says, given to all, then the question arises, what has the church to do? And the answer is simple, at least conceptually: we need to look at the world, we need to see it truly.

In today's passage from Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians*, he is addressing a church which is, in some ways strikingly modern. Folks in the Corinthian church know that they have the Spirit and its gifts. They apparently spend considerable effort trying to figure out whose gift is better than whose. They want to put the gifts in a hierarchy.

Paul seems quite willing to oblige, to propose a hierarchy of gifts – some are greater than others. But he wrecks the very structure the Corinthians want him to create, by saying that love is the primary gift. Paul understands love as acting in such a way that everyone else's gifts may

be effective. But if one acts to make everyone else's gift effective, then the dominance of the greatest gift becomes almost a conundrum, an oxymoron, at least a tension. If love is the highest gift, then that highest gift is constantly needing to question itself, to suppress itself, to look outside itself, to understand what can be done to help all those gifts everyone else has, to work. Thus Paul, even when he asserts a hierarchical structure for the gifts of the Spirit and therefore for the life of the church, asserts that structure in such a way that hierarchy can never become a matter of domination, but always only of service.

Thus, so far as traditional understandings of hierarchy are concerned, Paul inverts them. This is, by the way, something frequently missed when reading Paul. Paul says, have your hierarchy if you want it. (Human beings seem to gravitate toward hierarchy as flies to molasses.) But always remember that a proper Christian hierarchy inverts itself so it can never be a matter of dominance, of directing by force.

That's my first observation about the Holy Spirit and the church. God the Holy Spirit works, not by telling people what to do, but by calling them to a "way." In this, I feel the tension between a Christian vision and what I take to be the vision of the society around me. In our society coercion is considered trustworthy. At least we look to coercion as a means of problem solving. I would argue that behind the search for technological solutions there is an understanding of the world as passive and therefore appropriately coercible. How to deal with decreasing salmon runs? We have tried fish ladders, trucking, screens on turbine intakes at dams, monitoring populations, even the destruction of dams, all technological solutions. How would it be if the only true solution is to change our relationship with salmon? To ask how we could use our technology to serve a call for an altering of the human relation to salmon would be a striking shift. To ask how humans could serve the vocation of salmon might seem peculiar. I'm convinced it is the kind of question we must ask, on the widest possible scale, if we are to live out of God's love for the cosmos.

Well, this works in the church, too. I don't know whether any of you have ever had that rather distressing experience of participating in a spiritual gifts assessment inventory project. You get a multiple choice test along with a grid consisting of a numerical scale on one axis and the names of various gifts on the other. As your answers fall on the grid, it tells you what gifts of the Spirit you have. Well, it's rather popular. But I sense – and perhaps I do an injustice here – lurking behind this chart and its cute definitions of gifts, coercion coming from a belief that human beings need to fit into some kind of predetermined mold. We have the definitions of various gifts over here to my right, and whoever you are over on the left. You are going to fit into at least one of the definitions, or if you are fortunate, into more than one. Here's the mold, here are you, and somehow the fit will be made. I believe that the discovery of the Spirit requires us to listen to other human beings with the utmost attention and concentration, and to listen not just to people, but to that inanimate world out there, because what it has to say doesn't exist in terms of some previously enunciated formula. And we must listen not just during a formal assessment, but everlastingly. There is no preexisting cosmic grid on or into which we fit ourselves or are fitted by others. Vocations are unique, not homogenized.

In addition, to listen to the Spirit is not to listen only to what God said a thousand years ago. It

is to listen to what God is saying now, today. Maybe what God said a thousand years ago can be helpful in sharpening our ears – I, at least, believe that it can. But merely paying attention to the past will not necessarily help us respond to God in the present. Plenty of people pay attention to the past, to the destruction of their souls and their communities. The past can teach horrible ways of existing as well as wonderful ones. And so, the past can guide, but the past cannot determine. Thus the past is no more capable of holding the Spirit than is the list of the Spirit's gifts in the test we discussed.

So the Christian is to listen to the Spirit, and, as Fortunatus says in his hymn text, not necessarily to draw a priori conclusions about to whom or to what he listens. God expresses his reality as definitively, as carefully, with as much truth, in a chocolate factory as in a church. Listening needs to happen in both places. The difference is not in what God is doing, but in what we are trying to do. I have to be careful how I say this, because I'm tempted to say that in church we're trying to listen, but while that's not a mistaken purpose for listening in the church it falls far short of a comprehensive one. More fundamentally, we're trying to educate ourselves, to remind ourselves, to prepare ourselves, to listen. The church is a practice field; it is not the sole locus of the real presence of God. The real thing is out there, beyond these walls, that's where the listening has to happen. There is a true sense in which God is at least as present, if not more present, in the world than in the church. The church offers us a framework within which we can practice listening to each other. And it's hard enough within the church. We all know that. But then, when we step outside the walls of this building and go our ways, to be a Christian means that the listening, the practice we have engaged in here is introduced there. Our listening here is sacramental, because the listening ear is really listening but it is also practicing a listening by listening to a symbolic dramatic presentation of salvation. Out in the world, we are listening with less help from a symbolic presentation. The object is to hear the salvation of God being offered the world. That's what is meant by using the traditional language which says that the church is a means of salvation. You don't get salvation by being in here; you receive it by being here and then by leaving. The last movement of the service is replacing hymnals on shelves, sorting your music, walking upstairs and into that intermediate purgatory known as the coffee hour. Walking out is the last liturgical action, the willful and definitive movement between symbolic presentation and actual practice.

As Purgatory is between hell and heaven, so the coffee hour is between the church and the world. It's not quite worship. It begins to be a bit like the world, and the temptations of the world all return to us as we are no longer singing holy songs and saying holy words. It's there that the process of listening to the created mystery of the other needs to begin. So I invite you to approach the coffee hour as a period of transition between the formal, symbolic world of worship and the ordinary world of everyday, the world in which the meaning of worship needs to become the pattern of life is Christianity is to have meaning.

That's that piece. Now, one more aspect of relations between the church and the Spirit. Human theology tends to be strained through the cultural. If you look at the 20th century history of thinking about the Holy Spirit in the churches of the United States, you find that the church has understood the Holy Spirit either as a largely forgotten and therefore quasi-meaningless theological inheritance (the Holy Spirit as "vague, oblong blur") or as a means of getting

something done. Ministers want their churches to get the Spirit. Why? Because then programs will go better. We will get things done. The church will grow. And so on.

Most of the time this latter attitude toward the Spirit isn't articulated, but even in the staid and stony Episcopal Church, back in the days when I experienced a rather enforced attendance at vestry meetings, I do remember people on vestries, some even clergy, saying "What this church needs is to get the Spirit. And then our problems will be solved." Well, not quite, as the Charismatic Movement ought to have taught us – it created as many problems as it solved. But to understand God as problem solver, that's American. That's what we think things do if they're worthwhile. They solve problems. Look at pay scales for various jobs. I would bet that jobs understood as problem solving jobs are paid more highly than care taking jobs. This explains the position of education. Education, especially the education of young children, isn't understood as problem solving, but as care taking. What would happen in the church, if we understood the search for the Spirit as a form of care-taking, rather than searching for the solution to problems? I don't know. It might be worth trying. Even pastoral care is frequently understood as problem solving. People come to see me not because they want a conversation in which we share our understanding of God, or our experience of her, or our struggle to respond. Hardly ever do people come to me for that kind of conversation. They come to converse "because we have a problem." And it just may be that one of the reasons why the church in our society feels rather far from any foundational understanding of what I can understand as God is that we tend to think of God as a problem solver rather than a caretaker.

It makes a difference because here we are today, celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit, and I think we need to be careful that we don't celebrate it as if it were the gift of a tool. There is one sense in which old-fashioned Trinitarian language has it right. To receive the Holy Spirit is to receive a person. To receive a person, to receive the person of God truly, requires hospitality. That means to receive a relationship, and relationships are not just kept in a box to haul out when one needs to solve a problem. That way of using them simply does not work. Anyone whose relation with God is alive and growing will know that God is not a utensil, he's not an instrument.

So much for the church and the Spirit. When we receive the Spirit we don't receive a tool for problem solving. When we receive the Spirit we receive a relationship mysterious as most relationships are. We are never quite sure where it may be going. We receive something which is more in the line of care taking than anything else, of being able to respond to what the other is. And in the genuine presence of the Spirit in the church there is always also a kind of humility which says: this is practice, this is, if you will, a study group getting ready for the exam which takes place not in here, but out there.

Last point. The only reason to be a member of the church is to enable membership in the world. Ultimately it is not isolation from the church which dooms us or anyone, but isolation from the world. And the church, when it is doing its proper job, when these vestments are seen and understood, when the liturgy is appreciated for what it is and what it has to say, when it is God who is at the center and not our scriptures or traditions, we discover that it all, scripture, tradition, reason, points out there, towards the creation, towards the kosmos which is the object

of God's love and must, therefore, as Christians, be the object of ours.

In summary, John's gospel has it right. Christ dies to save the cosmos. He dies for the sake of the world, only that's too small an understanding. God acts for the cosmos, understood as everything which is real. The life of the church, the reception of the Spirit, our existence as the body of Christ, is for the salvation of that which is real. In the end, I will not be saved alone. (I'm not even sure I exist alone, but that's another story.) Being saved is a most worldly thing. I don't see much point to it if I and the world are not dragged into heaven together. I do not want to sit on a heavenly cloud playing a harp if there are no trilliums there or pets or children or mountains or intellectual puzzles or church potlucks or good friends. These things are who I am. To be saved without them is to be saved as a shadow, as a fragment of myself. It will not be. To be saved without that which we love is not to be saved. God loves not only the church, but the cosmos, and what God loves he saves.

That's enough of that. Please stand for the creed.