

RCL YEAR A, THE FEAST OF PENTECOST, May 11th, 2008 (Mother's Day; Baptisms)

Numbers 11:24-30; Psalm 104; Acts 2:1-21; St. John 7:37-39

St. Edmund's Episcopal Church

The Reverend George F. Woodward III

The Rector approached a young Dad before a baptism and said, *"Baptism is such a serious event...I just want to make sure you're prepared."*

"I think everything's in order," the fellow said, *"We have a crowd coming over after lunch and my wife's lined up a caterer."*

"What I meant," said the Rector, *"is are you spiritually prepared?"*

"Heck yeah!" said the man, *"It's a full on open bar!"*

A couple of Saturday's back I presided at a baptism for Kelly JoJeanne Singhal, granddaughter of Dann and JoJeanne Angeloff. Kelly's parents Jenny and Shelly had flown in from Hong Kong to continue the tradition of family baptisms at St. Edmund's, and it was a joyous event, as our baptisms today will be. I was talking with the proud grandfather afterwards and he was reflecting on how his son-in-law's took such an active role in the raising of their children, changing diapers, shouldering household tasks, sharing in play and discipline.

Social norms have changed in American culture. Men are now encouraged to take an active and nurturing role in child rearing. Dann Angeloff, with a father's perspective, thinks the current generation of men has been much enriched by that shift.

As we meditate today on the meaning of the coming of the Holy Spirit into the lives of Jesus' followers, we might begin by thinking about how the Holy Spirit offered an expanded vision of the nature of God. Most of our inherited language about God employs masculine imagery. But the actions of the Holy Spirit are overtly nurturing, protective, compassionate and intercessory. They remind us that God is beyond gender. Humankind, male and female, was created in the image of God, Who embodies the qualities of both genders. Feminine imagery for God is a happy contribution to a deepened understanding of God's work in the world, and seems especially appropriate when Pentecost and Mother's Day coincide!

Recent social shifts in parenting practices serve also to remind us that to be human means to have at hand panoply of gifts and tools. We are enriched, as Dann Angeloff observed, when we permit ourselves the full range of human expression, and we are diminished when we conform overmuch to received stereotypes. There are masculine and feminine attributes to be sure, but they are not so narrow as we sometimes try to make them.

The Church's experience of the Holy Spirit is the experience of God over and over again upsetting conventional notions and leading us into fresh ways of thinking. Surely part of the Spirit's movement in recent decades has been to help us surmount stereotypical gender roles for a more complete embodiment of what it means to be human.

It is clear from today's lessons that the work of the Holy Spirit in Church and culture is often rule-breaking and confusing, a necessary feature of transformation.

When God pours the Spirit of prophecy and leadership onto the seventy chosen to assist Moses, God doesn't abide by the rules of the Israelites, but pours that Spirit also on

Eldad and Medad who prophesy in the camp. This confuses and upsets Joshua, and Moses has to instruct Joshua that God can't be constrained by our rules and expectations. It is for us to learn and follow where God is leading.

When God pours out the Spirit on the disciples gathered together that first Pentecost Day there is a profusion of languages, amazement and consternation. Some accuse the disciples of being drunk at nine o'clock in the morning! Peter explains that God is shattering old categories and old ways of thinking.

We might deduce that the signs of God's Presence in our midst in the present day will also cause us consternation, and we might want to look afresh at what offers us initial distress to intuit the deeper meaning which may be there at work. God is never stagnant or static. God is always doing a new thing. It is for us to learn and follow where God is leading.

Hence, when we pray, we ought always to ask for new eyes to see God at work, and especially to understand how God is at work in ways we resist. We need to pray also to *feel* God in our lives, to ask God to overpower us by the Spirit as were those first disciples. We want to stay so firmly in control, we are wed so deeply to the rational and measurable, that we may unknowingly resist the Holy Spirit, and miss the gift and joy and comfort of a felt and emotional *experience* of God in consequence.

We bring one infant and three adults to the waters of baptism this day. We pray that God will take them each for Her own, Mothering, nurturing, guiding and supporting them into all the fullness of life which God intends for them.

In order to support these persons in their new life in Christ as we will shortly pledge to do, all of us need to be intentional in opening our hearts also this day, and in asking for the Gift and grace of the Holy Spirit, Who will rattle our world as often as She consoles, admonish as often as She approves. As a child rests secure in the presence of a strong and loving mother, as a mother creates an environment in which a child may grow and achieve his or her potential, so may we know the involvement of God our Mother and our Father, our Advocate and Guide, the fire that quickens our souls, animates our gifts, challenges our expectations, and makes us useful in the world. Amen. GFW+