

Gifted To SERVE

June 12, 2011

Pentecost Sunday

Texts: John 7:37-39, I Corinthians 12:3-13

A minister from Central America was touring the U.S. raising financial support for missionaries in his home country. At a church luncheon, he was telling the guests about his country, his family, and the important work being supported there. As he concluded, he said, "And I have a charming and understanding and supporting wife but, alas, we have no children." He tried to explain his wife couldn't bear children, but what he actually said was, "You see, my wife is unbearable." Puzzled glances in the audience prompted him to try to clarify by saying: "What I mean is, my wife is inconceivable." Hearing laughter in the audience, he tried again, saying, "That is, my wife, she is impregnable!" Language can be a tricky means of communication, even when people are ostensibly speaking the same language. A significant part of the Pentecost miracle is that language was not a barrier; all heard the message of the disciples clearly, and they heard it in their own languages. At Pentecost, the story of Babel is reversed. At Babel, proud humanity wanted to build a tower to reach heaven. In Pentecost, heaven came down to earth to reach us (*in the words of that old hymn, "Heaven came down and glory filled my soul."*) And when heaven came down, when God poured out His Spirit, the confusion of languages begun at Babel was exchanged for a fusion of languages, and "... every one heard them in their own language."

"Heaven came down." We worship a God who humbled Himself and came down to us, became one of us, and sent His Spirit to live in us. Last Mother's Day I mentioned that a message reiterated again and again throughout the Scriptures is that humility is the path to God's grace and blessing. Our English word "Humble" comes from the Latin *humilis*, which means low or lowly; the root word for Humilis is *humus*, which is Latin for dirt, the ground, earth. Part of true humility before God is recognizing we are little more than animated dirt; as we acknowledge with the ashes of Ash Wednesday, "from dust we came and to dust we shall return." God created us from the dust and breathed life into us. And as we humble ourselves before God, as we acknowledge our place before Him, He lifts us up. You've heard it said, "What goes up, must come down." Well, in God's economy, what goes "down" will come up!

This imagery is captured and reiterated in that fourteenth century epic poem by Dante, the Divine Comedy. The Divine Comedy is an allegorical pilgrimage through Hell and Purgatory to Paradise. Purgatory is pictured as a mountain, and at the very top of that mountain is Eden, Paradise restored. But the pilgrim can't seem to find a pathway up that mountain. He learns he must go down before he can go up; that the way to "up" is "down." He must descend into Hell before he can ascend to Paradise (*which is something of a reference to what we confess in the Apostle's Creed, Jesus has descended into Hell for us; he received the penalty for our sin, before He ascended into heaven.*) After Dante and his guide, Virgil, made their perilous journey down through the Inferno, they leave Hell and begin their ascending journey up Mount Purgatory by passing through a gate. Canto 10, Line 1, reads, "When we had passed through the threshold of the gate, we discovered we were through the gate forever closed to those souls whose loves are bad."

"... we were through the gate forever closed to those souls whose loves are bad." For Dante, those confined or consigned to Hell are those whose loves were bad. They loved, yes; there were many loving people in Hell, but they were there because they loved wrongly, they loved poorly, they loved unwisely. If you think about it, this is the main reason any of us sin, really: we love *badly*. All of us love; I believe love motivates just about all we do! We all try to love, we all want to love, but often we do not love well. We love the wrong things, we love the wrong way, we overdo our love in passion or fervor or misdirected devotion, and our loves wind up going bad.

Literary scholars tell us Dante was very much influenced by Aristotle; and Aristotle spoke about love with these words: "Love is that which seeks its place." Love is that which seeks its place. According to Aristotle, Love is the animating, driving force that makes everything seek its right "place." It is the driving urge that compels everyone and everything to seek their proper place, their right place, in the grand order of things. According to Aristotle, this driving force is built into God's creation. Why does the water run downhill and try to make it to the sea? Because the sea is the water's place, that is its home. Its home

isn't on the mountainside, so it runs down the mountain to get home to its place in the sea. For Aristotle, Love is that driving force that compels all things to find their proper place. On a related note, the poet Robert Browning wrote, "Take away love, and our earth is a tomb." Take away the driving, compelling forces of love, and this world becomes a deathly still place, there's just no motivation to move. *(Those of you who've known grief know that feeling ... the one you love is gone, and you have no motivation to even move at times ... but that's another sermon.)* When we love **badly**, when we love wrongly, we feel somehow ... *dis-placed*. We lose our way. We can't find our place. We get lost. And life becomes somewhat chaotic.

A little over ten years ago my neighbor and I hired a local tree service to remove some rather large trees abutting our two yards. The morning after the trees were removed, my then-seven year old son was playing Nintendo 64 and was startled by a strange (and LOUD) noise coming out of the fireplace. He came running upstairs to get me. I came down, but could not figure out what the noise was ... a loud, intermittent *rat-at-at-at* which sounded like a little jackhammer. I looked up through the fireplace into the chimney and could see nothing, so I then went outside. That's when I saw the source of the noise: a hapless, obviously disoriented, and apparently frustrated woodpecker banging away at the metal grate of my chimney cover. My guess was that this poor bird was lost. With the removal of those trees in the yard, this poor, disoriented woodpecker had lost his familiar place, and I think he was banging his head against my chimney cover in a mix of confusion, frustration and perhaps even anger. He was lost. He was disoriented. He felt out of place. When your place is moved ... when your place **changes** ... it is disorienting, to say the least. When you lose a job, a home, when you lose someone you love ... a parent, a sibling, a spouse, or even a friend ... you experience almost a vertigo of spirit, because your "place" has changed. You become like the confused woodpecker, the "self" you once were can't seem to find its old place to roost. Not only has your "place" changed, your very identity has changed: You are no longer a child, you are a middle-aged orphan. You are no longer a spouse; you are a widow or a widower. You are no longer the younger sibling, you are the surviving child. You are no longer one half a two-parent team, you are a single parent. The self you once were cannot find its old place to land, because it isn't there. Your place has changed, and you feel lost.

When we love badly, when we love wrongly, we also feel a similar displacement. We lose our way. We can't find our place. We get lost. We're lost because our corrupted natures, our distorted loves, keep us from finding our right place; we keep losing our way. We can't find our way home, we don't know where we belong, and we don't know how to get there, we don't know how to authentically love. Psychiatrists' offices are full today of the human equivalent of confused woodpeckers, people continually trying to be what they are not made to be, trying to do what they were not made to do, trying to live as they were not made to live, and they just can't seem to find their place. That's the great danger of sin. It isn't just the wrong things we do. It's also this resulting inability for us to authentically love, to find our right place.

And that is the main reason why Jesus Christ left His place at the right hand of God, and in love and humility came down to give Himself to us and for us that we might find our place, our right place, the place we were meant to be. He left His place to show us the Way of Love, the way TO love, and to show us the love of God, and to help us find our place.

"Love is that which seeks its place." Again, why does the water run from the top of the mountain down the valley and into the lakes, rivers and eventually the sea? Because that is its place. It came from the sea, and it is driven to find its place. In Jesus Christ, the Living Water of God's love goes the opposite direction. Its place is above, for it came from God. Through the grace of Jesus Christ by the agency of the Holy Spirit this living water flows from God down to earth and into every human soul who has bowed in humility before God. And it is the love of God in our souls that **lifts us up**, that compels us to look upward, that moves us to love as He loves, to love the things He loves, and animates us to serve as He would have us serve, gifts us and places us in the body of Christ which is His church, thus helping us to find our true place, our right place ... which is in union with the God who loves us, and living to serve Him.

(editor's note: after giving this sermon, I was informed I was partially right ... what the woodpecker was doing was establishing his territory by using the chimney to make this loud noise. More than likely he had previously done so by pecking on the now-gone tree, so he was somewhat misplaced ... but the commotion he made is something male woodpeckers just do.)