



Peculiarities of the Spirit

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Sunday, May 11, 2008*

Numbers 11:24-30:

So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again. Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Acts 2:1-21:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"

This morning we share in the extraordinary privilege of baptizing six little creatures (Anna and Grace at nine; Kaela, Julia, Henry and Parker at eleven). In so doing, we witness and share in the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit upon them. What do we think this means? What do we expect will happen to or for these six—the very newest little Christians in all of Christendom? What shall be our hope for them?

In one sense, we know the answer and can affirm with faith and confidence what will happen. In another sense, however, we do not know, cannot possibly know, what this gift of the Spirit will mean for each of them.

Here is what we do know: We know that through the waters of Holy Baptism they are blessed as children of God, created by God, to love God, to seek and be found by God. We know that in this rebirth they receive the forgiveness of sin; God's covenant that when they fall short or turn away from God, God will always, always welcome them back and gather them to God's embrace. And we know that they receive God's promise of eternal life, that by the resurrection of Jesus Christ they are free from the bondage of death. So what we know is that they receive blessing, forgiveness and promise.

What we do not know is how any of this will take shape and be manifest in their lives. We do not know of the challenges life will present them, nor of the ways in which they will meet those challenges. Their parents, godparents and grandparents may have an inkling of their unique gifts, but even they cannot know how those gifts shall bear fruit. In short, we know they receive the Holy Spirit; while we do not know the particularities of the Spirit's fire and power in their lives.

I wish to speak of the particularities of the Spirit.

As the scene opens in our Scripture from the Book of Numbers, the Hebrew people are amid the exodus—from slavery in Egypt, destined eventually for the promised land, now wandering in the desert. The people have once again been grumbling and griping about their predicament, and Moses has once again called upon God to come and set things right.

God has intervened: has come down and spoken with Moses and seventy others, and has taken some of the power that Moses had received and given it to the others. An extraordinary event: To be in a group of people in which each and every one of you is aware that you are in the presence of God, that God is giving you—each one of you—power and the spirit. The Spirit prompted each one of them to prophesy. I'm not sure just what is meant by that; perhaps they could see their situation and their future prospects with sudden and great clarity. Perhaps it was an overwhelming physical or emotional experience akin to ecstasy—a numinous sense of being filled with the presence of God—maybe good, maybe scary; either way it was overwhelming and singular.

There are two, however—Eldad and Medad—who were not part of the group. These two also received the Spirit and are found to be prophesying. Joshua—who will later fit the battle of Jericho—tells Moses to stop them. Hah! Moses says, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them." What Joshua seeks to contain, Moses would bequeath to all.

What we've got here is a group of people embarked on a project. A couple of them are going off with their own ideas, inspired with new vision. One from the group says, "They can't do that! That's not part of the plan; make them stop it." In reply, Moses says, "We need all the vision and insight we can get, however odd it may be. Besides, how could I stop what God is initiating?!" What we're privy to is the tension between the desire for conformity, on one hand, and the unpredictable, uncontrollable inspiration of diversity, on the other. We're not talking about any old diversity; we're talking about diversity born of and inspired by the presence of God in two individual lives. The spirit had rested upon Eldad and Medad, prompting them to prophesy. Moses, himself filled with the Spirit, is more than willing to give them free rein.

Many miles and many, many years later when the disciples of Jesus receive the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, there is a huge crowd gathered—Elamites, Parthians, and the rest—"from every nation under heaven." We are told "each one heard them speaking in the native language of each."

I speak English and you speak Mandarin and when she speaks—"she" is the Holy Spirit—she speaks Kikuyu. When she speaks Kikuyu, I hear English and you hear Mandarin; "each one heard them speaking in the native language of each." Just like at the United Nations but without any translators and no electronics. "In our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." So now you and I—Mandarin and English—we don't speak the same language; the gift of the Spirit does not create conformity. But it does create unity, because now we have heard a common word, have received the same word from God; we share that. Yet we each speak in our own tongue, free to take that received gift of Spirit and exercise our own particularity.

In his First Letter to the Church in Corinth (12:4-7), Paul summarizes: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Over the years, people of faith have lived with a tension. Seeking unity of belief, there are those who would act as Joshua did to suppress the Eldads and the Medads among us, those who would elevate conformity as necessary for unity. Often the institutional church, seeking to shepherd and manage the flock, insists on conformity. If you are charged with managing a great many people it is easier if you can just get everyone to do the same thing. Thus, over the years we have needed the spirited voices of those who break free and unleash the particularities of the Spirit upon us, prophesying the truth for the common good.

Very briefly, I wish to name three chapters in the life of the church when the particularities of the Spirit overcame the tendency for conformity.

First, in the second half of the 16th century, when the Church of England was coming into being, the church was in tumult. On one hand, having broken with Rome, many of the clergy and people were influenced by the reforms sweeping through Europe—an emphasis on each individual’s capacity for salvation through grace alone, not mediated by the priestly order. On the other hand, many remained committed to the traditional practices of the Catholic Church and maintained allegiance to the Bishop of Rome. Under the short reigns, respectively, of King Edward VI and of Queen Mary, the church and country swung first in one direction, then back in the other, until the brilliant compromise of Queen Elizabeth established a lasting solution, known as the Elizabethan Settlement. Determined that there be just one church united, yet recognizing the diversity of faith and the particularities of the Spirit, Elizabeth declared that all must conform to those practices necessary for salvation, but any other practices—not necessary for salvation—could be changed and adapted according to local custom and interpretation. Not only did this provide for the growth of the church in England, it paved the way for what would eventually be the worldwide Anglican Communion, united in matters essential, yet unique, particular, and varied in our local practice.

In the second half of the 20th century, Christianity has been reshaped by what is known as liberation theology. Accurately speaking, there are distinct liberation theologies—black liberation theology, women’s liberation theology, and Latin American liberation theology being the most pronounced. These arose as individuals struggled to make sense of the disparity they experienced between the words of the scriptures and the church, on one hand, and the actions and realities practiced by the church, on the other. Women heard that they were loved by God, equal in the sight of God, but did not find that statement lived out through the church’s behavior. African-American people heard God’s deep commitment to justice but experienced a church that implicitly if not explicitly supported a segregated and unjust society.

Whereas most theologies begin with a notion of God or begin with a statement of belief, liberation theologies begin with the lived experience of individuals. One begins by asking: “How have I experienced God in my life? Who is Jesus for me? In what way is the Spirit enflaming my soul to act?” Among Roman Catholic villagers in the “base communities,” the *base comunidades* of San Salvador, or among African-Americans in the cities of this nation, what emerged was a determination that the “truth” as espoused by the church, which happened to be dominated by white males of European ancestry, was not truth for them. Their truth was valid, is valid, and needs to be lived.

The third chapter is unfolding in the Anglican Communion today. The fabric woven so many years ago with the Elizabethan Settlement is being tested anew as we debate and negotiate what matters are essential and thus to be held in common by all and what matters are particular and thus to be practiced differently locally. In what manner of things must the church in Philadelphia resemble the church in Canterbury or the church in Nairobi? Is it enough that we share one baptism and one Holy Eucharist or must we also share one common understanding about issues such as the particularities of human sexuality? There are many in our Anglican Communion who say the time is come to tighten the weft and the warp of the fabric, to create and impose a structure that will insure conformity. Yet there are many who insist upon the freedom of local practice, who claim that the fabric has and can and must give, stretch, accommodate, even propel and evoke the newness of the Spirit.

I’ve not heard anyone claim Eldad and Medad as patron saints, but the Spirit is coming in power and great might upon these six little children of God, bestowing upon each one of them unpredictable gifts of vision and wonder. May they lead us into the realms of God’s justice and God’s light. Amen.