

Holy Comforter

B Pentecost--Ezek 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-7, 16:4b-15

Today we celebrate the feast of Pentecost, the day on which the disciples received the Holy Spirit, as our reading from Acts records. Now the Holy Spirit is one of our faith's theological oddities. What exactly *is* this Holy Spirit? Certainly it draws from the Old Testament tradition of depicting God's breath as a wind that brings life to things, as in the creation account in Genesis and the dry bones vision in today's reading from Ezekiel. The New Testament also seems to paint the Holy Spirit as a kind of force or presence which is given to the disciples to lead them forward once Jesus has ascended to God and is no longer around to lead them himself.

This force's characteristics differ from book to book in the New Testament, but its effects seem always to be counter-cultural. In Acts, the Holy Spirit frees people from law, unifies them across barriers of nation and language, draws them to live together holding all possessions in common, and inspires them to extend their community of God radically outward to include eunuchs and gentiles and all kinds of other untouchables. In John, on the other hand, the Holy Spirit's counter-cultural presence has a different quality. It provides a spirit of truth or advocacy to indict the values of the world and stand by Jesus' followers. Bible scholar Sharon Ringe tells us that John's word for the Holy Spirit, *parakletos*, is literally "made up of the participial form of the verb 'to call' and the preposition 'beside' and thus means one who has been summoned or called to the side of another."ⁱⁱ This term tends to carry the connotation of a courtroom or legal proceeding, and is often translated as Counselor or Advocate. But that root meaning of

someone who has been called to the side of another carries other possibilities too, as in the King James translation "Comforter."

So the Holy Spirit is not just about giving us the courage and the breath to speak the truth. It is not just about breaking down social barriers through radical community or carrying on "Jesus' 'lawsuit' against the values of the world."ⁱⁱⁱ It is also found in the one who comforts. And this idea, too, is counter-cultural in its quiet way. We no longer live in a world like that of the Bible, in which sickness is quite so religiously equated with impurity and moral degradation. But maybe we are not so far from that worldview as we think, either. It was only about twenty-five years ago that Princess Diana made headlines simply for touching a man with AIDS. And we continue to treat dying not as a natural process but as a medical failure or even as a socially embarrassing condition. Nan and I knew a woman our age who was dying of cancer and felt such a sense of shame about it that she withheld the information even from her closest friends. Instead she faced the illness alone and in secret, and when she died an entire community of folks who loved her were stunned by the news. Hers is an extreme example, but it reflects a culture that maintains a code of silence and denial about mortality and ill-health. In that context, to come to the side of the sick and the dying is a counter-cultural act. To be a comforter is to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

This Pentecost we are also honoring our retiring deacon, Sue Brown, and I can think of no one who had more clearly embodied this Comforter Holy Spirit than Sue. Just the other week, I had the privilege of joining Sue in a pastoral visit to Clara Moyer, who was in the process of dying. Clara was a little foggy, and her awareness seemed to come and go. So Sue just pulled a chair up beside the bed and put her hand on Clara's

arm. She spoke in her quiet, Sue Brown tones, gently rubbing Clara's arm every once in a while, just as a way of saying, *We are here with you. You are not alone.* As soon as she sensed that Clara's energy for the visit was flagging she leaned over and told her that we would be going now but would be back again. There's no specific word or act that captures this, but those of you who have been visited by Sue will know what I'm talking about: she was just completely *attuned* to Clara, absolutely available in this sacred way. I could see the Holy Spirit, the Holy Comforter, shining through Sue's presence at that bedside to which God had so clearly called her, just as it has at countless bedtimes to which God has called her throughout her ministry.

So, as Sue has shown, the Holy Spirit leads us to be counter-cultural not only by going out and breaking down social barriers, not only by speaking and living against some of the prevailing values of our world--materialism, say, or our worship of youth. The Holy Spirit leads us to be counter-cultural also by being with those who are suffering. The Holy Spirit leads us to be counter-cultural by allowing our own mortality, our own vulnerability, to cultivate in us a deep empathy for others and a willingness to turn towards them and be present with them in their hours of need. And just as God gives the disciples this gift of the Spirit on the feast of Pentecost, so has Sue given us this gift of her example throughout her many years of service to the church. Sue may be moving on to a new role in the church. But surely that gift of her companionship, her comfort, her particular way of reflecting the Holy Spirit, continues to shine as a witness and a calling to us all.

ⁱ Sharon Ringe; Commentary on John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15; accessed on 5/28/09 at <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx#>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.