

PENTECOST 10

ACTS 2:1-11

THE SURPRISES OF PENTECOST

I suspect that some of you parents can resonate with this story.

It seems that it was a day like today, that is, Sunday morning,

and, a mother hurries into her son's bedroom

and speaks agitatedly at the sleeping bundle.

“Look,” she cries, “it’s Sunday. Time to get up.

Time to get up and go to church. Get up!”

The son mumbles from under the covers,

“I don’t want to go.” “What do you mean, “I don’t want to go?”

responds the mother. ***“That’s silly.***

Now get up get dressed and go to church!”

He says, ***“No, I don’t want to go***

and I’ll give you two reasons why not.”

He sits up in bed and continues,

“First, I don’t like them and second, they don’t like me.”

The mother replies, ***“Now, that’s just plain nonsense.***

You’ve got to go to church

and I’ll give you two reasons why.

First, you are fifty-one years old, and second, you’re the pastor!”

Ah, first surprise, then laughter.

Such is the basis of today's feast of Pentecost.

Return to the Scripture, to the gospel.

The disciples of Jesus were hiding.

They were hiding in fear behind closed and locked doors,

shutting out the rest of the world

which was hostile, persecuting, and terrifying.

They felt better huddled together in isolation planning what to do next,

where to go. And then, a surprise!

Into their isolation Jesus comes. Through closed doors he walks.

Past locks, he breaks in. Surprise first, surely, but, just as surely,

there must have been laughter,

at first nervous and hesitating but afterwards long and loud

as the impact of their friend's presence sank in.

I am not sure they would have laughed so long and hard

had they known what the friend would ask of them,

but for the moment, they rejoiced.

What he would ask, of course,

was what the mother in our story asked:

Get out of bed, get out of your isolation and fear, and go to church –
to the assembly, to the world, and announce the Good News.

They too are quite correct to protest.

***“We don’t like them and they don’t like us –
That’s why they were hiding.”***

But the answer they get is this:

You’re thirty or forty years old and you’re the pastors,
the shepherds of a needy flock, the bearers of the gospel,
the announcers of salvation and forgiveness.

You must go. You have a mission.

But since they¹re scared and unsure,

Jesus promises them another surprise.

The Spirit, he says, will come at Pentecost

and will enable them to do what they cannot do for themselves.

What Spirit?

The Spirit of wisdom and understanding,

the Spirit of love and compassion,

the Spirit of passion and courage.

And when that promise is fulfilled,

the disciples of Jesus in turn surprise others!

They run out of their isolation, break open the locks and doors
and in the public square –
these people who had recently been hiding full of fear –
they speak openly and even speak in tongues
so that some of the crowd laughs because they think they're drunk.

The disciples do not care.

They are laughing too, and they are busy being surprised
that five thousand are baptized that very day.

And as each page of the **Acts of the Apostles** turns,

the Spirit continues to cause surprises:

of cures, courage, martyrdom,

and the remarkable spread of the Good News. That was then. ,,,,

Does it happen now, the surprise of the Spirit?

In a cynical age?

Let me share a brief synopsis of Mother Teresa's biography.

I don't know if you know that originally, she joined a community

called the Sisters of Loretto,

which is a cloistered community that did teaching.

To prepare for her task, she, a Yugoslavian,

went to Dublin to learn English

and from there she was sent to a cloister in India

to teach the English-speaking daughters of the rich.

That was her call. Her life was laid out.

But in 1947, you might remember, India obtained its independence,

but at the price of revolution

where Muslims and others split into warring factions.

Food supplies were cut off and the school where Mother Teresa

was working felt the shortage.

How to feed and take care of three hundred girls?

So, for the first time in fifteen years

she was forced to leave the cloister

and go out and find food to bring back.

But while she was out there, something happened.

She could not help but notice the terrible carnage.

There had been some five thousand people killed,

some fifteen thousand wounded, and they were visible all over.

It was a horrible sight and it spoke to her deeply.

She felt something happening to her. She felt the Spirit moving.

She realized then and there

that she could never go back to the cloister.

She felt strongly that the Spirit was calling her

to a different and a radical life.

So, she surprised everyone one day

by asking a permission that was unheard of:

could she live outside the cloistered community and in the world?

Her superiors hesitated,

but finally gave her permission to do so as a two-year experiment.

So, out into the world she went, but only to discover another surprise.

She found out that after the revolution and the war were over

that the sick and dying were not just a part of those events

but they were in fact everyday events,

part of everyday life in the streets of Calcutta.

She was stunned.

The turning point came one day when she came across a woman

whose body, eaten by rats, was lying in the street.

She went in search of help, but discovered

that there was no hospital.

So, Mother Teresa rented a little one-room home

and got some volunteers to help this poor woman.

Soon someone gave her a larger house to work out of
as she gathered more unfortunate people from the streets.

And from there it began.

The needy grew, the space grew, the volunteers grew until eventually
she formed her own community, the ***Missionaries of Charity***.

By 1970 there were 585 sisters
working with the poor and abandoned.

By 1995 there were 2400 sisters working not only in Calcutta,
but all over the world, including the Bronx
and Newark, New Jersey in the USA.

In her biography Mother Teresa speaks of surprise.

At her age, time, and place, she remarked, would she, could she,
do something different, be something different?

She was, like the apostles,
hiding behind the closed doors of her cloister
when the Risen Christ surprised her.

He came through the locked doors and breathed his Spirit on her.

He called her to a second vocation.

Like Mary, she was surprised by the Spirit in a most dramatic way

and the world has noticed the difference.

But that's drama and Pentecost invites us to see it as such,

for the apostles, for people like Mother Teresa.

But for most of us, the surprise of the Spirit

is likely to be more gentle and unfolding.

The key is to be open to it.

There is an interesting early woodcut that Rembrandt,

as a very young artist, did of the Prodigal Son.

It shows the Prodigal Son in full face, dressed gorgeously,

falling before his father whose face we do not see.

The emphasis is on the son.

But at the end of his life, when Rembrandt had seen a great deal

and had grown in depth and wisdom, he redid that scene.

And here, in this mature piece of his old age,

we do not see the face of the son at all.

All we see is his back.

The focus of the picture is now on the father, on his face,

on his gentleness, holiness, and compassion,

every line in his face

bespeaking mercy and forgiveness.

And then you realize that the picture is not so much

a painting of the story of the Prodigal Son

as it is the story of the artist himself, a record of his journey.

You can see that, in time, the Spirit has worked on his pride.

He had learned humility and experienced mercy and so,

almost without realizing it, he had changed his focus

from the gorgeously dressed son

to the humble, wise father, the God of Compassion.

The Spirit had entered quietly through the closed doors of his youth

and summoned him to be something more.

And those who compared the two pictures were surprised.

Today's Scripture remains steady and comforting

throughout the ages

and we who are here today celebrating a festive Pentecost

must remember the cause of our joy:

with God, today's feast says, the book is never finished,

life is never over, the door is never closed.

Slam it in God's face if we will,

lock God out by our sins and addictions as we might,

hide from God as we wish, cringe with fear as we desire.

Put him off as we might,

Pentecost says that Jesus will break all the barriers down

and breath a mighty Spirit upon us,

the Spirit who forgives, the Spirit who calls,

the Spirit who can make a difference.

It is true: From the apostles to Rembrandt to Mother Teresa,

the Spirit is full of surprises. May He surprise you too! Amen.