May 31, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I wrote my customary letter to you on May 30th, and went to bed figuring that I would do final editing and then transmit the text electronically as usual on May 31st. The problem is that I went to bed in 2020 and – without benefit of a souped-up DeLorean - seem to have awakened in 1969. Like then, a malevolent spirit of mayhem and strife stalks our land. Today is Pentecost Sunday, and events testify that we need it as urgently today as ever.

Pentecost should probably be rated right after Easter in religious importance. It has its origins in the Old Testament early harvest Feast of Weeks (Shavuot) [[1]](#footnote-1) which occurs 50 days after Passover. Christians celebrate Pentecost 50 days after Easter to commemorate the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that the Apostles would receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Many of us remember the familiar biblical story of the giving of the Holy Spirit, which is likened to the descent of tongues of fire upon the apostles. [[3]](#footnote-3) Not only does this event give birth to the church, but the gift of “tongues” (actual languages spoken in that day) signals creation’s renewal by the reversal of the confusion of human communication in the Tower of Babel story. [[4]](#footnote-4) Without a doubt, there was a *lot* of excitement and celebration associated with this gift of God, whose scope is indicated to be universal by the list of races and nationalities Luke indicates were present. But that was *then;* what about *now?*

Because, as Paul Harvey used to say, we are so familiar with “the rest of the story,” it can be easy for us to overlook the perplexity and despair that must have dogged the disciples before the Spirit came upon them. They had ridden an emotional roller-coaster unique to human experience, which has left them terribly confused. First, all their hopes were crucified along with their beloved Master. Then, as they cowered behind locked doors for fear of being next, they were greeted by the resurrected Jesus. Imagine their *elation* in being able to again bask in his risen presence! Yet, just when they are starting to feel like things are getting back to normal - *poof*- he ascends away from their presence. A week later, they are *again* huddled in that upper room, wrapped in a cloak of gloom and uncertainty, that practically begs them to doubt God’s faithfulness and give in to fear.

It’s pretty easy for us to identify with those disciples because we have all been emotional yo-yos over the past 2+ months. We have been hit with a triple whammy of pestilence, economic devastation, and now civil violence. It’s increasingly hard to tell the difference between the anarchists, politicians, and partisans who subvert the public good by stoking division with violent rhetoric and actions. The whole situation evokes the words of Theodore Roethke’s poem *In a Dark Time,* which begins: *“In a dark time, the eye begins to see. [[5]](#footnote-5)* So, what is it that we see in the dark? Our own shadows; both individually and as a people.

The poem continues: *“I meet my shadow in the deepening shade…….* *My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly, keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is* I*?”* What is expressed is that most of us only become aware of a deeper self in the midst of crisis that shakes our carefully crafted identities. And the dawning awareness forces us to reckon with whether we will simply retreat back into our chosen blindness or instead engage in a bit of shadow boxing to discover the light that shines in the darkness reminding us of what our souls call us to be and do.

There is a fable which begins when a farmer finds a young eagle that has fallen from its nest. [[6]](#footnote-6) He took it home and put it in his barnyard where it soon learned to eat and behave like the chickens. One day a naturalist passed by the farm and asked why it was that the king of all birds should be confined to live in the barnyard with the chickens. The farmer replied that since he had given it chicken feed and trained it to be a chicken, it had never learned to fly. Since it now behaved as the chickens, it was no longer an eagle.

*"Still, it has the soul of an eagle,”* replied the naturalist, *"and can surely be taught to fly."* He lifted the eagle toward the sky and said, *"You belong to the sky and not to the earth. Stretch forth your wings and fly."* The eagle, however, was confused. He did not know who he was, and seeing the chickens eating their food, he jumped down to be with them again.

The naturalist took the bird to the roof of the house and urged him again, saying, *"You are an eagle. Stretch forth your wings and fly."* But the eagle was afraid of his unknown self and world and jumped down once more for the chicken food. Finally, the naturalist took the eagle out of the barnyard to a high mountain. There he held the king of the birds high above him and encouraged him again, saying, *"You are an eagle. You belong to the sky. Stretch forth your wings and fly."* The eagle looked around, back towards the barnyard and up to the sky. Then the naturalist lifted him straight towards the sun and it happened that the eagle began to tremble. Slowly he stretched his wings, and with a triumphant cry, soared away into the heavens.

It may be that the eagle still remembered the chickens with nostalgia. It may even be that he occasionally revisited the barnyard. But as far as anyone knows, he never returned to lead the life of a chicken. Will we be able to say the same?

If we want our land to revive and prosper, then perhaps we should not be too quick to “play chicken” by returning to a “normal” that has been too often characterized by our lesser angels - power abuses, gross racial and economic inequities, regarding the vulnerable as expendable, and *“you can’t tell me what to do”* tantrums. [[7]](#footnote-7) The lesson of all this chaos is that the only reliable way to ensure the welfare of each of us is to seek the welfare of all of us. For a positive result, we don’t need more political or moral clucking; we need the soul of an eagle.

Roethke’s poem ends by saying, *“A fallen man, I climb out of my fear. The mind enters itself, and God the mind, and one is One, free in the tearing wind.”* What he describes is a Pentecost that is not merely past event but also an ever-present invitation to fulfill our soul’s deepest yearning by entering into the grace-filled life of God (note that I did not put it the other way around). Perhaps the inability of so many churches to celebrate Pentecost in their sanctuaries today is a sign to us. The first Pentecost didn’t happen in a sanctuary or synagogue; it happened in a “secular” household and then spilled out as a healing presence in a broken world. We need that Pentecost, and we need to take it to the streets today.

Grace and Peace,

Dr. Bob

1. Leviticus 23:15-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John 14:26 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Acts 2:1-21; see also Joel 2:28-29 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Genesis 11:1-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1960/01/16/sequence-in-a-dark-time> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://www.greatexpectations.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/exp4/FableoftheEagleandtheChicken.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <http://www.carolspearson.com/2020/05/may-27-2020-pearson-blog-the-power-of-story-in-a-time-of-crisis-and-potential-social-renewal/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)