

Be Careful What You Pray For

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Acts 2:1-21 and The Gospel According to St. John 20: 19-23

May 31, 2020 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

Would you like to know what are the most dangerous words you can ever speak in your life?

I will tell you.

“Come Holy Spirit, come.”

Why are these words so dangerous?

The late Eugene Peterson, a remarkable Presbyterian pastor and author, once made the following observation. He wrote: “One of the indignities to which pastors are routinely subjected is to be approached, as a group of people are gathering for a meeting or a meal, with the request, ‘Reverend, get things started for us with a little prayer, will ya?’ It would be wonderful if we [pastors] would counter by bellowing William McNamara’s fantasized response: ‘I will not! There are no LITTLE prayers! Prayer enters the lion’s den, brings us before the holy where it is uncertain whether we will come back alive or sane, for ‘it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God.’”

Honestly I can’t imagine any pastor I know who would have the gumption to say this. That’s why it was a “fantasized” response, as Peterson admitted. We pastors are, in our time, what my old friend Ted Wardlaw described as a “quivering mass of availability,” too timid to say “boo” to a church mouse much less to warn our people about the dangers of casually invoking God’s presence in a prayer of “invocation.”

But, why are these words, “Come, Holy Spirit, come” so dangerous? Why is it a “fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God?”

Simply put, if we invite God to show up, he might. And when God shows up, God doesn’t tend to leave things (including us) the way he found them.

God has this nasty habit of transforming people by the renewing of their minds. And, I have to warn you, when it comes to being transformed by the Holy Spirit, it means becoming saturated by the God who is Love. And that is dangerous in this world. It is dangerous because it requires vulnerability.

Saint Paul says that God’s power is made perfect in our weakness. How? Because in our weakness we discover that God’s power is completely unlike the notion of power in this world. The power of this world could be demonstrated by an iron grasp of control; God’s power is symbolized as an open hand releasing, letting go, freeing, creating.

God did not demonstrate God's power by incarnating himself as a warrior who sliced and diced his way through his enemies, dispatching them to their deaths, overtaking new territories and controlling those he subjected.

God demonstrates his power by incarnating himself in a man who refused to return evil for evil even when the creatures he created tortured and executed him. God's only constraint upon us is love.

When we pray, "Come Holy Spirit, come," as the church has prayed for centuries, millennia, "Veni Spiritus Sanctus, veni," we are inviting God to come into our lives, to drench us, soak us, baptize us, drown us in God's love.

Pema Chodron, in her wonderful book, "When Things Fall Apart," tells the story of a Dad watching the television with his toddler when suddenly the television program is interrupted by a news alert reporting on the terrorist attack on a government building in Oklahoma City. The bombing, as you will remember, took a terrible toll on the day care center for the little children of government employees. The Dad, holding his own toddler, watched as the tiny bodies were lifted from the rubble.

Pema writes that our usual reaction to such a moment is to try to run from it, to hide ourselves from the suffering and hurt, thinking that by doing so we are being kind to ourselves. We are not, she says, because it is by opening ourselves to the suffering of others that our hearts grow and become strong, strong in vulnerability, strong in love and compassion.

On the desk in my bedroom are pictures of Debbie and our children and our grandchildren. Something strange has happened to me over the years, especially since our grandchildren came along: I notice more than ever how precious children are, how fragile, how much they need our care and our gentleness and our patience and our protection. There's a strange spiritual alchemy at work in our hearts.

You'll recall poet e.e.cummings when he writes: "Nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands." He's describing the subtle, quiet power of the love of another to open us. That which opens the heart is not a sword or a plow, but the love we feel for someone else. And, as we all know, love makes us so vulnerable. The other becomes so precious. And when our hearts open in this way, they don't stop opening at some arbitrary boundary drawn by the powers of this world.

According to ancient Christian teachings, the Holy Spirit is that mode of being of the one God which is God's own eternal, abundant life and love. It is that ever-flowing stream of divine love who creates all that is and holds everything in existence. When the Holy Spirit shows up, so does the love that is God because this is who the Spirit is.

And this is why the miracle of Pentecost is not in the flames and doves, nor in the ability of people to speak new tongues, new languages.

The miracle of Pentecost is that people who didn't speak the same language understood each other.

When God showed up, tribes broke down. Is there any message in the gospels more needed today than this? "Come Holy Spirit, come!"

Scripture says that there is an unforgivable sin. It is unforgivable, not because this sin is more powerful than God's grace, but because those who commit it don't want to be forgiven. It is the sin of "*grieving the Holy Spirit*," grieving God, grieving the God who is Love, by violating the law on which every commandment is built, the law of love.

Why would anyone spurn the forgiveness of God? Why would anyone grieve the Holy Spirit?

I don't know.

I suspect the answer lies somewhere deep inside our rebellious hearts. Maybe it is a failure to trust that God's power really is power. Which means that whatever we may say in church, we're not about to look weak out there in the world.

Maybe it is a kind of pride, even arrogance, that feeds on swagger and aggression. The kings of old once required their courtiers to say things like, "O king, greatest of all potentates, may you live forever!" They knew it was a lie even when they said it.

Maybe there's a little sovereign inside each of us who pretends to be "master of the universe," a tiny little king who fears that vulnerability will bring self-deception crashing down.

Maybe the reason we risk grieving the Spirit of God is because we are so tightly gripped by whatever version of tribalism that is current among us.

I don't know. But this I do know: There is no power greater than God. And God is love.

I don't much like political advertisements for any candidates and any party. This aversion only hardened while living in the midst of a tri-state political market in northern Kentucky where your television showed ads for candidates in Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio. In that region called Kentuckiana (and it's called that because no one could bring themselves to call it Indyucky) we got political ads touting the candidates' "unique" "Indiana values" and "Kentucky values" and "Ohio values," which, of course, were all identical. .

It felt to me like the boasting of one tribe over another, although both tribes were made up of pretty ordinary folks all of whom shared the same values, tried to live by them, and often failed. But, of course, if we can convince ourselves that members from the other tribes don't

share the values we do then we are under no obligation to love them, and we certainly don't need to understand what they are saying.

Pentecost is the Day when the incarnation went viral and the church was born. And, although the book of Acts tells this story admirably, it is too honest to gloss over the fact that tribalism was the first and enduring struggle of the infant church. As the Spirit worked in the world, often dragging the apostles along against their will, one wall after another fell, until even gentiles were allowed to become members of the church.

But the story of Pentecost only begins there. Acts is unique in that its final chapters have yet to be written. Perhaps they are ours to write. The God who is Love, the Holy Spirit, hasn't stopped breaking down walls and building bridges, and transforming people to this day. It has been truly said, God meets us where we are, but never leaves us when he found us. And so, today, if we dare, we pray:

"Come Holy Spirit, come."

Amen.