

The Wild Goose for the Common Good
Pentecost
June 4, 2017
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
Clemson, SC

Prayer: Come, O Holy Spirit. Come as Holy Fire and burn in us, come as Holy Wind and cleanse us within, come as Holy Light and lead us in the darkness, come as Holy Truth and dispel our ignorance, come as Holy Power and enable our weakness, come as Holy Life and dwell in us. Convict us, convert us, consecrate us, until we are set free from the service of ourselves, to be your servants to the world. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

The setting of our OT reading comes from Numbers when the people of Israel are in the wilderness and journeying from Egypt to the Promised Land. They have just left Mount Sinai and are murmuring because they crave meat to eat. The people are complaining to Moses and Moses has cried out to God for help.

Numbers 11:24-30

Paul writes to the church at Corinth that is experiencing factions. They are divided over the spiritual gifts of speaking in tongues. Paul seeks to correct their misunderstanding.

I Corinthians 12:3-13

Pentecost is known as the birthday of the church, when God poured out the Holy Spirit into the lives of the disciples of Jesus Christ as recorded in Acts chapter 2. Flames appeared on each one's head.

(Light a big red candle on the pulpit.)

Some of you may know that the power was out at the church this week. Now I can attest this was true in one sense, but it was just the electricity, not the real power. If we believe in the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we know that the power can never go out of the Church. By the work of Jesus Christ on the cross and risen from the grave, even death has lost its power, but the Church never will.

I have been Presbyterian my whole life. When I was a child, my church did not celebrate Pentecost because we were not in the practice of worshipping through the liturgical calendar. I remember hearing about the Holy Ghost as it was called. I likened it to Caspar the Friendly Ghost cartoon. I think my experience of the Holy Spirit is probably not unlike many Presbyterians.

I have been Presbyterian my whole life. I was decent and in order before I even knew what that meant. Over the last year as part of my connectional service to the church I have been moderating the Session at one of our sister churches while they have been without regular pastoral leadership. In my communications with the clerk one day I mentioned that something went against my “decent and in order gene.” She too grew up Presbyterian and knew exactly what I meant.

Now I’m not saying that *I have been Presbyterian my whole life* to set up a boundary to anyone who has not, or to create a false sense of status. I am simply giving you my context, a context that includes the understanding and living out of the concept called “the priesthood of all believers.” One of the strengths of small churches is their ability to embody this in radical ways, to the point that even ruling elders will preach the sermon on Sundays when needed.

This priesthood of all believers is something that we take seriously, at least when we want to, like when we offer the forgiveness of sins to one another. When it is manifested in tangible ways the body experiences the power of God that is both exciting and mysterious.

For Moses, in his context, he longed for help and even asked God to let him die rather than continue in solitary leadership of the people. He was longing for a priesthood of all believers. So God heard Moses and answered with 70 elders. That may sound like a lot, but that was for overseeing a flock of 600,000 people so it was a start.

God transferred some of the Spirit on Moses to the 70 elders. But what are we to make of Eldad and Medad? Their names mean “loved by God” and “object of love.” They were two elders who received the Spirit, but had remained in the camp instead of going out to the edge of camp and circling around the tent of meeting with the rest. Were Eldad and Medad disobedient? Joshua seemed to think so. He wanted Moses to stop them from prophesying. Moses, being the weary but wise leader that he was, saw that the Spirit had empowered them and so Moses welcomed their leadership.

So here’s the test on this story....

- Who was the Presbyterian in this story? Joshua.
- Who was the Pentecostal in this story? Eldad and Medad.
- Who was the spiritual leader in this story? Moses.

Now that is not to say that Joshua, Eldad and Medad were not spiritual, but Moses *respected the Spirit’s work* and *the Spirit had chosen* to empower these two elders despite their location. Let’s just say that Moses was ready to enjoy someone else saying the blessing at the next pot luck dinner.

This is a great story for building up church officers—see how God transfers some of the Spirit for leadership onto the elders? Granted they only prophesied that one time in this story, but Moses discerned that God’s Spirit would not be contained, regardless of one’s status. Moses respected the power of the Spirit to do its work in whom God chose.

In the same way God transfers the Spirit to those 70 elders who prophesied, so too does that same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God empowers each person, **each person**, in the Corinthian church. **I believe it is no ordinary thing that as the story of God's covenant people continues, so does the widening of the circle of those who receive the Holy Spirit.** *For God so loved the world.* The world—that is how wide the circle grows— so each person in *this church* is empowered by the Spirit as well.

The gifts given by the Spirit are many and varied, but given for the common good. And there's more, the Spirit chooses to give varieties of services and activities or workings to the people too. Labels of ethnicity and economics fall away as the Spirit baptizes. The one body of Christ then is not just filled with individual gifts and abilities, but serves and works together for the common good. That common good extends beyond the church to all people.

In modern times Celtic Christians began using the Wild Goose as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. This is not to negate the symbol of the dove that descended at Jesus' baptism, but to acknowledge the surprising and disturbing power that the Spirit unleashes. Wild geese, as you may know, fly in a V-formation. The lead goose flaps its wings and as a result uplifts each one in succession. Together they can fly 71% further than alone. Amazing! But each goose also takes a turn at the lead. And they honk encouragement at the leader. Every one's gifts are needed to sustain the community. ***Thus the Wild Goose for the common good is how the priesthood of all believers works.***

It reminds me of the meal we provided a few weeks ago for the construction workers who had been in Clemson across the street for two years. All that was needed was provided, and fast too, like the Wild Goose. The Spirit empowered the people to work a miracle to feed so many so quickly. The Spirit moved persons to come and serve and translate. To learn one another's names. Today we will gather at the table of our Lord and all that is needed has been provided by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Years ago at a conference I met John Bell, a Presbyterian pastor in the Church of Scotland. John led the music and had over a thousand folks singing four part harmony *a cappella*. I was in awe of the one body of Christ during this service of worship. One song in particular spoke to my soul. It was an African American spiritual with these words as the chorus.

Over my head, I hear music in the air.

Over my head, I hear music in the air.

Over my head, I hear music in the air.

There must be a God. There must be a God.

There must be a God somewhere.

Today I imagine these words might bring comfort to those in England and other places who are mourning this day and hoping "*There must be a God somewhere.*" The lyrics and tune and, yes, even our hands in the air, moved me in a powerful way. John, and his friend Graham, along with others had named their collective the Wild Goose Resource Group.

Some years later for almost every Saturday for five years I was sustained as I worshipped in the car up and down I-85 with songs from the Wild Goose. If you know me, you know that I am a night owl and not a morning lark. But to follow God's call on my life, going to seminary meant giving up my Saturdays. I had to rise every Saturday at 5 AM, leave by 6 and drive from Greer to Charlotte. Classes began at 8:30. Lunch at noon. Worship at 12:30. Afternoon class at 1:30 and back in the car at 4:30 arriving at home by 6:30 or later.

A few semesters I went up on Fridays and stayed in a friend's home. Several weeks during that time I was with my mother in the hospital near Raleigh after she was diagnosed with colon cancer. But all through this time I was sustained by the Wild Goose.

At graduation the dean met with the 11 of us who were commencing the next part of our journey. He began with the words, "*I'm sorry*" and we thought that was something rather odd to say to us just before we received our degrees. But then he continued.

I'm sorry that from now on you will be viewed as the "professional Christian," the one that others think knows the Bible the best, or can pray the best, the one that family and friends will turn to at meals to ask the blessing. Do not always do it. Do not believe it. Do not allow other Christians to shirk their responsibility so easily.

You will meet others in your churches who are much more faithful than you and who have been at this a lot longer. You will need them to pray for you and with you. But do pray, and know that when you do, the Spirit will give you the words."

He was right. We need one another to be the one body of Christ. My friends, this Christian faith is all or nothing. Paul tells us that we will either say "Jesus is Lord" and actively live and serve and work within the body of Christ or we will not. The early church lived their life together studying the apostles' teaching, in fellowship and prayer, breaking bread together and caring for those in need. Let us do likewise.