

Pentecost—Acts 2:1-21

In the Bible, Jesus has so many names. Among them are Emmanuel, Christ, Lord, Logos, Son of God, Lamb of God, Light of the World, and Paraclete. If ever there was proof that these epithets are true, we need only look at the before-and-after pictures of the disciples. Before Pentecost, they were dense, timid bumbler who fled at the least sign of trouble and yet were egotistical. We may even suspect that what we read in the Gospel accounts has sometimes been softened. We know, for example, that Matthew softened Mark's portrayal of the disciples in some ways. For instance, in Mark we read, "James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." "What do you want me to do for you?" They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." But in Matthew's account, it was the mother of Zebedee's sons who came to Jesus and asked a favor of him. "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

But after Pentecost, these unremarkable disciples became fearless leaders. They healed the sick and cast out demons. They went to jail gladly for the sake of justice. How did this transformation happen? We read all about it in the Book of Acts. I have taken some of these ideas from Barbara Brown Taylor.

The last thing Jesus told his disciples to do before he ascended into heaven was to go back to Jerusalem and wait for God's promise to come true. They would be baptized by the Holy Spirit, Jesus told them and they would be clothed with power from on high. With little or no idea of what any of that meant, the disciples did as they were told. They went back to Jerusalem—not to the temple but to an ordinary room in an ordinary house—and there they waited, along with the women who had come with them, including Jesus' mother and his brothers.

For the most part, they prayed while they waited, and I imagine some of them were asking God to tell them something of what they were waiting for. How would they know when the power had fallen on them? Would it sizzle? Would it hurt? How did the Holy Spirit go about baptizing people exactly? Jesus had said something about fire, which sounded dangerous.

They did not have to wait long for the answer to their prayers. On the day of Pentecost, a Jewish festival set fifty days after Passover, they were all together in one place when they got a crash course in power. First there was wind. Then there was fire. Then they were filled with the Holy Spirit and overflowed with strange languages. They may not have known what they were saying, but the crowd they drew did. Devout Jews stood in the doorways and windows, listening to a bunch of Galileans tell about the power of God in their own tongues so that no one was left out. The Holy Spirit turned out to be a phenomenal linguist, whom everyone present could understand.

Still, it was too much for some of those present to understand. They were in the grips of a phenomenon that bypassed reason and some could not bear it, so they started to look for a reason. Some tried to say the disciples were drunk, but Peter said no. It was only 9:00 in the morning. Does that mean they might have been drunk if it were later in the day? Then, as now, it could be difficult to tell the difference between a person smitten with the Holy Spirit and one who was ill or intoxicated. During the '70's, when the charismatic movement was popular, I went occasionally to a Catholic charismatic group. At first, I found it interestingly different, but then I witnessed a scene that turned me off the group forever. A goal for some in the group was to experience being "slain in the Spirit." One woman, when "slain," was writhing on the floor, apparently looking for as much attention from the others as possible. I determined that she must be mentally unstable.

But some who are slain by the Spirit are genuine and we know it by the fruits. One such person whom I have mentioned before was Jerena Lee. She was born in 1783 in Cape May, New Jersey. Her family was black and although they were not slaves, they were so poor that Jerena was sent to a white family to be a servant maid at age 7. She did not receive formal religious training but naturally had a spiritual disposition. At a young age, she entered the stage called "conviction." That is, she realized she was a sinner in need of grace, but had not yet had any experience of the descent of the Holy Spirit. One day, while listening to a sermon of Richard Allen, who was to become the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal church, Jerena Lee had a powerful experience in which she realized that her sins were pardoned. She leapt to her feet in an ecstasy and the minister declared that she was another witness for the power of Christ to forgive sins. That was called the stage of conversion or justification.

After the mountaintop period was over, Jerena again went into a state of great longing. She prayed intensely, fasted, and wept. She was finally rewarded with sanctification, which was the equivalent to what happened to the disciples on the first Pentecost. That is, not only did she experience light for herself, but she was called to be a witness to others. She heard a voice saying “Go preach the Gospel!” She couldn’t believe it. But when she went to a secret place to pray, what appeared to her view was a pulpit with an open Bible lying on it. Two days later, she summoned the courage to tell Richard Allen, who was now the bishop, what had happened to her. His reply was “A woman preaching? Our Discipline knows nothing of it. A woman may exhort, but not preach.” It seems to me there is a very fine line between exhorting and preaching, but anyway, Jerena Lee was obedient and for the next 8 years did exhorting, but no preaching. Sometimes she felt like a fire was shut up in her bones.

One day, Jerena Lee was in a congregation in which a male minister was trying to preach but the spirit had left him. As if by a supernatural impulse, Jerrena Lee sprang to her feet and gave an inspired sermon on the very text that the male minister was failing at. What was really an amazing movement of the Spirit was that the bishop just happened to be present. He rose to his feet and related how 8 years before he had denied Lee the right to preach, but he now believed that she was as much called to the work as any man. Henceforth, Jerena Lee became one of the best itinerant preachers of her day, addressing people in homes, churches, camp meetings, and other outdoor gatherings. She traveled up and down the east coast from Canada to Georgia proclaiming the Word.