

The Pentecost of peace

John Dear | May. 13, 2008 On the Road to Peace

In May 1983 and May 1985, I attended Sojourners' "Peace Pentecost" rallies in Washington, D.C. -- prayer services and inspiring speakers and nonviolent demonstrations against war and injustice. Those were some of the most electrifying Pentecost experiences of my life. The police hauled hundreds away as we proclaimed God's reign of peace. I recall those days as we enter another Pentecost season, and wonder, how do we live out the drama of Pentecost today?

My days with Sojourners made matters clearer for me. The Feast of Pentecost raises issues that can drive us to the streets to demand justice and peace. It carries social, economic and political consequences. It takes up the ultimate spiritual questions, and so deals with life and death realities. But when I look around, I wonder: if such is true, do we really desire the Holy Spirit to come?

The Pentecost episode is recounted in Acts 2, a dramatic, amazing, even scary, experience. Things get underway with a loud noise. It's described as a thunderous rush of wind. Then fire, we're told, settles upon each of them, the author's literary image signifying that their lives were purged, transformed, liberated from the culture's violent presumptions.

But a careful reading says it was not just fire but "tongues" that looked to be made of fire. The tongue enables speech. Galilean peasants in the big metropolis come out of hiding and begin to proclaim "the mighty deeds of God." Pentecost, therefore, marks the beginning of the Christian community's public speaking about the nonviolent Jesus. It is the day when they were empowered to speak out boldly, come what may.

Out they go into the streets, speaking out. They gather crowds about them and tell of the nonviolent Jesus, of his love and peace, of his death and resurrection, of his new realm of nonviolence.

And as always, preaching "for" bears a stand "against" -- against empire, against its violence and wars, against executions and laws. Soon the Sanhedrin and other authorities get the gist of the message implied against them, and the disciples find themselves in trouble. Some land in jail, some go off to martyrdom. All enter God's reign of peace.

We hear the familiar story and take a deep breath. Are we sure we desire the Holy Spirit to come? I contend that we are. Deep down, I believe, we all want to live in the Holy Spirit of Jesus. We understand our fulfillment depends on it. Plus we understand all too well the evil spirits of the world. They lead us to bitterness and pain, lies and violence. They're not worth the time of day.

Through evil, unholy spirits, our lives are choked by hate, rage, meanness, arrogance, complacency, resentment, selfishness, irritation, egotism, and violence. And these rob us of life -- as do the imperial spirit of the United States, the deadly spirit of the military, the greedy spirit of Wall Street, and the soulless spirit of Los Alamos, New Mexico, where they are working hard on another generation of nuclear bombs.

These spirits only lead to domination, war and death. At the deepest circle of our hearts we yearn for a different spirit, a Holy Spirit. St. Ignatius Loyola says that the key to the spiritual life is to discern the spirits, to see whether we are living in the good spirit or an evil spirit.

We do that by noticing how things make us feel. If something makes us mean, selfish, greedy, resentful, and violent, if it gives us no consolation, then it's not of the Holy Spirit. So we must try to sort things out. We try to discern what's from the Holy Spirit and do only those things. And we try thereafter to abide in the Holy Spirit.

But how? we ask. John's Gospel offers a clue. When the risen Jesus first appeared to his friends, he said, "Peace be with you." Then he breathed on them and commanded, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Here we find some measure of guidance. To live in the Holy Spirit of Jesus is something of a contemplative matter.

Breathe in his spirit of peace, breathe it out upon one another. Cultivate his peace in our hearts, be at peace within ourselves. Make peace with our spouses, children, parents, neighbors, coworkers, everyone in town and everyone everywhere. Reject anything that is not peaceful. Be at peace with one another, with all humanity, with creation. Be at peace with the God of peace.

And when we do, as St. Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, the fruits of the spirit become manifest -- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

When we receive the Spirit we'll refuse to stay behind locked doors and live in fear. We'll refuse to defend the Way Things Are. Our hearts will be tender toward the claims of the poor. Even our enemies will puzzle over our loving openness to them. We will put away selfishness and greed; we will rebuff empire's claims on us and denounce its wars.

Otherwise we are pre-Pentecostal people or worse, anti-Pentecostal people. We reject the holy fire from heaven and call down hellfire and brimstone upon one another.

Others, especially some within the church, can likewise become a kind of fireman. They honor the idea of the Holy Spirit as far as it goes. Yet when a match is struck, they rush in with their hoses and extinguish Pentecostal fires. They throw up obstacles before those who would speak out for justice and peace, about the Gospel of peace and its fiery social, economic and political implications.

But notice the climax of the story. Peter takes the stage and launches into a speech worthy of Martin Luther King, Jr. He "stood up, raised his voice and proclaimed to them?" we read in verse 14.

Here was a man who only a few weeks earlier denied he had ever heard of Jesus. And now he electrifies the crowd, tells them they have blood on their hands. But not to worry, for God has raised Jesus from the dead. And here is the main chance to "save themselves from this corrupt generation."

We must do the same, become a Pentecostal Peter. If we want to live in the peace of Pentecost, we must take to the streets and speak out. We must get busy with the work of calling for the abolition of war, naming greed for what it is, protecting creation, creating justice and working for peace. We must speak out for the crucified and risen Jesus.

And you and me, we must do it in our own American context, saying something like this: "People of America, you have blood on your hands! You are participating in the crucifixion of Christ all over again in the poor of the world. We urge you, repent publicly, personally and as a nation of the mortal sin of war and global injustice. Repent of racism, sexism, indifference in the face of starvation. Repent of corporate greed and prisons and torture. Repent of abortion and the death penalty. Of nuclear weapons and abusing the environment. Repent of turning your back on earth's three billion impoverished people.

"Save yourselves from this corrupt generation! Change your lives! Simplify, disarm, become nonviolent. Side with the poor and work for the abolition of war, poverty, nuclear weapons and global warming.

"End the war in Iraq, beat your swords into plowshares and study war no more. Feed the hungry and house the homeless. Do justice for the disenfranchised. Resist the empire. Protect creation. Walk in the footsteps of the nonviolent Jesus! Live in his spirit of peace!"

Such words may or may not be well received. But to be Pentecost people -- the only kind worth being -- we must, like Peter and the early community, welcome the Spirit of the nonviolent Jesus, and use the new "tongues" we've been given to speak out.

Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will descend on us, like on the early community, in all her power and beauty and danger and excitement:

"Come, Holy Spirit, send your driving wind upon us and blow away the cobwebs in our hearts and minds and give us the fresh air of the breath of Jesus.

"Come, Holy Spirit, send your blazing fire upon us so that we may burn with love and compassion for each other and love every human being everywhere.

"Come, Holy Spirit, give us new tongues to speak the good news of peace, justice and nonviolence to a world of war, injustice and violence.

"Come, Holy Spirit, send us into the streets, into the world, to share the love of God with one another, to talk about the nonviolent Jesus, to denounce the evil spirits of violence, greed, war, injustice, greed, empire and

death. And then to proclaim Jesus' reign of love, mercy, disarmament, justice, nonviolence and reconciliation.

"Come, Holy Spirit, fill us with the joy of Christ, so that no matter what we're going through, no matter our problems, we may always live in you.

"Come, Holy Spirit, make us instruments of your peace. Help us to carry on the Acts of the Apostles. Make us heralds of a new world without war, poverty, nuclear weapons or global warming, a new world of love, nonviolence, justice and peace."

On May 17, John Dear will facilitate "Becoming People of Peace," a Pax Christi Assembly in Santa Fe, N.M. See:

www.paxchristinewmexico.org [1]. Information about his forthcoming autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, ttavailable on Aug. 1, can be found at

www.persistentpeace.com [2]. For further information about his writings and speaking schedule, see:

www.johndear.org [3].

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