

SERMON, ST JOHN'S PENTECOST

On Azusa Street in Downtown Los Angeles in a dilapidated old building the modern Pentecostal movement began in 1906 with the preaching of an African American evangelist by the name of William J. Seymour. The revivalist meetings, which continued until 1915, began when seven men were waiting on God, “when suddenly, as though hit by a bolt of lightning, they were knocked from their chairs to the floor” and began to speak in tongues and shout out praising God. As news spread about this amazing display of the power of the Holy Spirit, crowds gathered and people fell down under the power of God, were baptized by the Holy Ghost, while many were healed of multiple diseases and “sinners received salvation.” These meetings, decidedly un-Episcopalian in tone, were deprecatingly described by the LA times in the following terms: “Meetings are held in a tumble-down shack on Azusa Street, and the devotees of the weird doctrine practice the most fanatical rites, preach the wildest theories and work themselves into a state of mad excitement in their peculiar zeal. Colored people and a sprinkling of whites compose the congregation, and night is made hideous in the neighborhood by the howlings of the worshippers, who spend hours swaying forth and back in a nerve racking attitude of prayer and supplication. They claim to have the “gift of tongues” and be able to understand the babel.” The L.A. Times editor reminds me of Bishop Butler’s very Anglican response to the ministry of John Wesley in the 18th century: “Sir the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost is a horrid thing, a very horrid thing.”

Hmm...Gifts of the Holy Ghost a “horrid thing.” No matter how squeamish we may feel about the spiritual antics of the Azusa Street Revival, the event was truly miraculous in one important respect: it was unique in gathering together all conditions of people in an age when strict segregation of races and classes was the fiercely defended order of the time. We are told that Seymour drew together in that dilapidated building people of every kind, reminiscent of the nations represented at that first Pentecost in Jerusalem: Black, White, Asian, Native American, immigrants, rich, poor, illiterate and highly educated. Men and women were, indeed, healed of their physical infirmities, but perhaps the greatest healing of all was breaking down the barriers that so insidiously divided people.

A few years after the Azusa Street Revival, just a few blocks away, in 1923 a strange and remarkable woman named Aimee Semple MacPherson built a magnificent edifice that was decidedly not dilapidated, the famed “Angeles Temple.” Angeles Temple was arguably the first megachurch and is to this day the flagship church of the Foursquare Gospel Pentecostal denomination founded by Mac Pherson. Here, through the 20’s and 30’s, she conducted immense public healing services where tens of thousands of people were healed and where she employed countless Hollywood style stunts to convey her clear heaven and hell Evangelical message. On one occasion, for example, she road a motorcycle across the access ramp to the pulpit, slammed on the breaks and raised a hand shouting as if she were a traffic cop, “Stop, you’re speeding to hell!” She was the first evangelist to employ the radio to reach hundreds of thousands of listeners and used Hollywood actors and huge orchestras to present weekly religious dramas at the Temple. And, of course, as a Pentecostalist, her preaching induced ecstatic displays of men and

women being baptized in the Holy Ghost, speaking in tongues, being slain in the Spirit, fainting and dancing. As amazing as all these displays of Spirit possession were, the truly stunning aspect of the work of Aimee Semple MacPherson was that, like William Seymour's Azusa St. Fellowship, the Angeles Temple was a fully integrated community where men and women of all kinds were honored and welcomed. On one occasion, the Ku Klux Klan, angered by this public gathering of people of all races, showed up in their hoods and were so moved by MacPherson's vision of the Holy Spirit drawing all people into one great fellowship, that after the service their robes and hoods were found discarded by the door of the Temple.

In 1936, the Walker family's general store in the Ozark village of Humansville, Missouri, burned down. They loaded up the truck and moved with countless other Dustbowl folks to the lemon groves of Ventura County, CA. Their youngest son, Roscoe Clayton, worked picking lemons, then got a job as a stockboy at the JC Penney branch in Santa Paula. He heard of the ministry of Aimee Semple MacPherson and took the street car into Los Angeles to hear her preach. Convicted of his sin and slain in the Spirit, Clayton became a devoted member of the Foursquare Church and adhered to its strict principles, played his banjo in church and spoke in tongues, believing that improper interpretation of tongues was the sin against the Holy Ghost. Most importantly, Clay learned at Angeles Temple the precious truth that the Holy Spirit unites people of all kinds into one great fellowship, that acceptance of difference blesses us, that the heart of Jesus is open to all. I was truly blessed that day in October, 1964, when my mother married this amazing man in Las Vegas and he became my stepfather and the single most important influence in nurturing my vocation as a priest. Yes, the fiery Foursquare Church is a far cry from the Episcopal Church, lovingly known as "God's frozen chosen," and the modern Evangelical movement bears little resemblance to the open-hearted movement it once was, but I owe so much to that deep faith in the unifying power of the Holy Spirit that Clay learned from that strangest of women, Aimee Semple MacPherson. Clay taught me that God's heart is infinitely open and so must our own hearts.

On that first Pentecost the true miracle wasn't the speaking in tongues itself, but the gathering of the nations, demonstrating that the Holy Spirit is fundamentally about unity. The scattered nations and races of the world are brought together and though they speak a myriad of mutually unintelligible tongues, they understand one another! This is the undoing of the Genesis story of the Tower of Babel, whereby the nations and peoples of the world are scattered and speak multiple languages because of their hubris in trying to build a tower to storm heaven. Yes, the Spirit is God empowering the Church for mission and ministry – we speak of this day as the "Birthday of the Church." Yes, the Spirit is the inspiration behind all creativity, all art, all invention, whether within or outside the Church. Yes, the Spirit is the power of God that binds us to one another in love, not just in the fellowship of Christ's Body, but also in all our relationships, our friendships, our love affairs, our marriages, our bond with children and parents and so on. But ultimately and most importantly, the Spirit is the power of God that holds the entire universe together in one blessed union of Love. As I have said before, we must move beyond merely speaking of only the Church as the Body of Christ and embrace fully the truth that all creation is held together by the Spirit in an infinite union that we can call the Body of God. All things and beings are interconnected by virtue of the Spirit. I think of the Buddhist/Hindu understanding of the Web of Indra, which is a web of infinitely faceted jewels that reflect one another infinitely, displaying absolute interconnectivity. The Anglican priest,

Alan Watts, who interpreted Eastern philosophy for Western minds, wrote the following about Indra's Web: "Imagine a multidimensional spider's web in the early morning covered with dew drops. And every dew drop contains the reflection of all the other dew drops. And, in each reflected dew drop, the reflections of all the other dew drops in that reflection. And so on, ad infinitum. That is the Buddhist conception of the universe in an image." That, my Sisters and Brothers, is also the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of unity by whom and in whom the entire universe is woven into a perfect interconnected oneness. As Paul says of the Body, every member matters and the pain or joy of each member affects the whole. A butterfly flapping its wings in Keokea affects the weather patterns in Japan! The way we view the universe most profoundly effects the manner in which we treat one another and the earth. If we nurse hatred and tribalism toward those who differ from us, we thwart the unitive power of the Holy Spirit – we, in fact, commit the true "sin against the Holy Ghost," which Jesus characterizes as the only "unforgivable sin." If we understand that all creation is bound together as God's Body, when we mistreat the earth through pollution, overconsumption and species loss, we also commit the "Sin against the Holy Ghost." We are not simply hurting God's Body, but our own selves, our families and our descendants, all the members of that Body.

So, this festival of Pentecost is an amazing day! Through the birth of the Church the greatest of all truths is affirmed: that by virtue of the Holy Spirit, who holds all things together in one magnificent union of Love, we are infinitely interconnected. We are called to live our lives as if this really is true and to therefore make a healing difference in this short time we pass through this world. And, if it necessitates riding a motorcycle down the aisle of this church for us to get that message, then perhaps I should do that!