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6.3.17 Homily

Pentecost

Acts 2:1-11; Ps 104:1,24,29-31,34; 1 Cor 12:1-13; John 20:19-23

Elsie Hainz McGrath

The gospel coming of the Spirit on Pentecost was a way of telling us about the *new* Pentecost that was experienced by the followers of Jesus as they carried on in his stead -- and began to recognize his presence within themselves. In a similar manner, the scriptural coming of Shavuot (Pentecost) for our Jewish forebears was a way of telling *them* about the *new* Pentecost that was experienced by the followers of Moses after he presented to them the mythical Tablets of the Law of YHWH -- and they began to recognize the divine presence among themselves.

Ronald Rolheiser says every generation needs to experience Pentecost for itself because every generation needs God's Spirit, and needs her in its own particular way. Have we ever needed a new Pentecost more than we do today, in this 2017 world of civil unrest and environmental genocide?

Rolheiser points to four over-arching problem areas that smother the light and the breath of the Spirit in today's climate.

First, a propensity for distraction, which is perhaps the most powerful narcotic on the planet. TV, tablets, smart phones and computers; endless noise and news in 40 characters or less anesthetize us; billionaire entertainment figures and sports figures are more familiar to us than our own neighbors, often even our own family members; fake news and narcissistic badmouthing have become the way of the world. Our prayer for Pentecost 2017 needs be for a spirit of wisdom, a spirit of depth, a spirit of courage.

The second problem area is a tendency to see individual fulfillment as salvation, so that we can't (or won't) deal with the painful give-and-take of ordinary relationships: the habitual slights and hurts that arise in every marriage, family, community, parish, and civil group. So we withdraw -- into isolating cocoons that we self-importantly label as "finding ourselves" -- and whether that's drinking alone or jogging alone the end result is withdrawal, the escalating need to disengage, and an increasing inability to relate with others. Our prayer for Pentecost 2017 needs be for a spirit of resiliency, a spirit of forgiveness, a spirit of patience, a spirit of long-suffering, a spirit of understanding, a spirit of connectedness.

Third is a proclivity for ideology and fundamentalism. These beset us, both socially and ecclesiastically, like so many nasty viruses. We are infected with ideologies, whether left or right, that block us from experiencing vital parts of life. We rationalize our biases by compromising the hospitality, charity, respect, catholicity, and tolerance that are core gospel values -- core *human* values. Our prayer for Pentecost 2017 needs be for a spirit of mellowness, a spirit of expansiveness, a spirit of kindness, a spirit of compassion.

And finally, Rolheiser names an obsession with sexuality that has led us to lose the proper balance between out-of-control societal "norms" and the sanctity of relationships -- between desire and intimacy, between decadence and decency, between promiscuity and fidelity, and especially between mutuality and abuse. Our prayer for Pentecost 2017 needs be for a spirit of chastity, a spirit of respect, a spirit of faithfulness.

So we continue to rejoice in celebrating each year this wondrous day of gospel Pentecost, which can indeed be called the birthday of the Church because it marks the new Pentecost of the Spirit for those who would come to be called Christians. This was a demarcation from Shavuot, the new Pentecost of the Temple, which marked a Pentecost of the Law for those who would come to be called Jews. We need to remember, however, that until the Divine Law and the indwelling Spirit of God are fully activated and *lived-out-of* -- in our own experience -- they are nothing more than ancient religious history. Just as our earthly birthdays are celebrated with a reverential nod to those beginnings we only know from the family lore and a heartfelt wish (hopefully, prayer) for what our lives will be *from that moment on*, so must each holy

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celebration of Pentecost honor its beginnings while concentrating on the holy actions of the Spirit within us *from this moment on*.

The Spirit *is* sent. She *is* alive and active. How will we invite her presence and energy to renew the face of the earth -- *through us* -- this year?

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6.10.17 Homily

Trinity Sunday

Exod 34:4-9; Dan 3:52-55; 2 Cor 13:11-14; John 3:16-18a

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Imagination is defined as “the faculty or action of forming new ideas or images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality.” The world of ideas, whether in the field of theology or of science, is fueled by our imagination. And one of the most imaginative of all ideas ever has been the one Christians call The Holy Trinity.

Sacred is defined as “the power, being, or realm understood to be at the core of existence and to have a transformative effect on lives and destinies.” Sacred was never intended to be “higher” or “more than” secular. It meant neither supernatural nor religious. But it could be a synonym for both “holy” and “spirit.”

So here we are once again to **Trinity** Sunday. And here we are once again stuck in the mystery of it all. Because who among us really believes anything we were brought up with or mindlessly professed in regards to the three-in-one god? And how do we even coherently define what we *do* believe?

One commentator has, interestingly enough, presented a comparison to the three bears fairy tale which comes close. It kinda is a Law of Three theology lesson, which honestly, it seems, was done better by the literary genius of folks like Aesop and Lewis Carroll than by any of the Fathers of the Church anyway.

This commentator, Brian Pitts by name, of course has the Daddy Bear as God the Father. The Mommy Bear is God the Spirit, and the Baby Bear is God the Son. All of them are Divine Beings, *elohiym* in Hebrew, **and that is a plural word which has no singular form**. Daddy is called YHWH (meaning “I AM”), and they are the pre-existent and eternal Creator. Mommy is called Ruah (meaning “breath, wind, spirit”), and they were created before all else because they breathe life into all of creation. Baby is called Yeshua (meaning “rescuer, deliverer”), and they are every person ever sent by YHWH to save the living Cosmos.

The takeaway of the Three Bears Trinity goes like this: *We have a DNA which is the result of millions of years of evolution. But our **life principle** is that of a divine created spirit. Our physical body disintegrates but we live on. The elohiym you were as a child is the same elohiym you are now. You are the same person you have always been. Ergo, Yeshua said, “Unless you become as little children you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

And that, I guess, is where Goldilocks enters into the story. **She is we.**

An anonymous dissenter to the Three Bears tale offers another Trinitarian hypothesis for our consideration. It goes kinda like this. The creator (unnamed because there is no other like the I AM) exists in timelessness, and is constantly breathing soul/breath into life. Further, **this creator is imagination**. The spirit (meaning sacred or holy, but not in an uppercased manner) is coming in and out of us, physically in our breath, psychologically in our conscience, and morally in our choices. This spirit is genderless; and in fact, **gender is imagination**. And the logos is God’s pattern – the world the way it oughta be, the fitting together of the parts that make us grow, work together, rise toward sharing divine life.

The takeaway here is that *Jesus is **not** the logos, but only embodies the logos, in the same way as, say, an Australian embodies Australia – its country, its ideals, its past, its principles, even its flaws. Jesus saw himself as “the son of Adam,” an embodiment of all that is noble and meaningful but had “no place to lay his head”; he lived in exile, and he shared himself with us. Which is how he lives with us still in our peace and forgiveness, but also in the daily grind of life as it is.*

And that is obviously where we enter into the story. **We are he.**

Whatever our imagination perceived as the Sacred Trinity yesterday, or perceives today, or will perceive at the end of our days, we’re still dealing with that all-pervading Law of Three. And we’re still very definitely **an essential one of the three.**

Glory and praise forever! Happy Holy Trinity!

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6.17.17 Homily

Body and Blood

Deut 8:2-3,14b-16a; Ps 147:12-15,19-20; 1 Cor 10:16-17; John 6:51-58

Elsie Hainz McGrath

(bread & wine props)

I always loved going to noon Mass at College Church when I worked in SLU's Theology Department, which was in those days housed right next door to the church in Verhaegen Hall. I especially loved it when Frank Cleary was the celebrant because before the breaking of the bread he would humbly and reverently quote Paul: *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The break which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*

Somewhere, in the beginning perhaps, we had it right—this ideal of oneness that isn't so much an ideal as it is an unrecognized reality. That's why, in its simplest introduction to children and proselytes, we talk about "communion." Our communion with who we are and what our purpose in life is becomes palpably and miraculously real in circles of eucharistic sharing. Paul nailed it perfectly in his summation today.

What's my point? Perhaps that this purposefully prayerful act of eating and drinking *should* be – has always been *intended* to be—the **universally defining participation in becoming one fully human body.**

We didn't *need* to expend so many years and tears and sundering of bodies and souls in order to come up with a "perfect" theological explanation of what this communion is all about. We didn't need to draw a line in the sand beyond which no one could cross into an enemy territory of either *transubstantiation* or *consubstantiation*, Catholic or Protestant; even *less* between Christian or non-Christian of *any* ilk. And we didn't need, indeed, church laws that would bar *anyone* from the communion table.

Because this body and blood that we celebrate around this table week in and week out is something that *isn't*—and that *never should be*—up for debate and linguistic or liturgical turf wars. It is, plain and simple, communion: a starkly *simple* reminder that we *are* all one—from the time of the feeding of the manna in the desert, through the heartbreak of the exile in Babylon, to the last supper that Jesus shared with his friends before being executed, and into the homes of small groups of people learning and trying to live in a way of oneness and peace.

And beyond....

The mindful sharing of food and drink and memories around a common table does more to bond us than anything else we've ever tried. Even when we dilute it down to what I refer to as little plastic wafers, and even without any liquid with which to wash them down (which is surely why they figured out how to make the things dissolve on our tongues!), it works. Even if we move robotic-like, in winding single-file lines, get down on our knees and stick out our tongues as if we're waiting for mama to drop in a worm, it works. Even if we sit stiffly in rows of hard pews and pass tinkling trays of plastic wafers and thimble-sized glasses of grape juice down the line, it works.

It works too at the synagogue, where *nothing* is said about the bread and wine being the body and blood of Christ. And where the bread is not *even* unleavened, much less inedible! Their communion prayers, called *Kiddush*, translated literally as "blessing," begin as ours do: *Blessed are you, O God of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth... who creates fruit of the vine.* And *Kiddush* is often followed by a full meal from the same table by all who are able to stay and mingle and "commune" as one united family of God. Like ours, here, is often followed by a full meal at a neighboring restaurant by all who are able to participate and continue the communion. Or sometimes in this same building. Or in our homes before we share in other ways, like our First Friday gatherings, for example.

I believe that all cults have something similar, even those who define themselves as unaffiliated with *any* cult. Whether the meal is meager or sumptuous, it is a binding experience. And if we could see our way clear to raising families with that mindset in today's world of, on one hand, technologically egoistic isolation and, on the other, structurally enforced abject poverty, we would go far toward reclaiming our humanity. That is why the once-a-day family meal that *used* to be a requisite for families around this nation *was*. It's why treaties *were* forged between empires around banquet tables. It's why my Evangelical father, who was a bit lackadaisical about going to church, *insisted* on us attending the once-a-month

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service where they included communion. It's why we turn *off* the football game when we sit down for our Thanksgiving dinner. It's why Vatican II defined our Catholic Eucharist as "the source and the summit of Christian life."

And it is *precisely* why no one should ever be excluded from the table.

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7.1.17 Homily

13th Ordinary

2 Kgs 4:8-11,14-16a; Ps 89:2-3,16-19; Rom 6:3-4,8-11; Matt 10:37-42

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Our parents don't matter, right? Take their Medicare away, they're gonna die anyhow! Certainly, our children don't matter. Let 'em grow up unhealthy and uneducated. If our allegiance is with POTUS, family be damned. And we *will* undoubtedly lose our lives in the process, because we'll be giving up our very souls. But imagine the life we'll *gain*. We might even become one percenters! Rah, rah, USA. The land of the shackled and the home of the greedy.

It is unfortunate, to say the least, that lots of so-called "good Christians" take today's reading to basically mean something very much *like* that. They chirp about loving Jesus. And fail to *respect* their father and mother, fail to *protect* their sons and daughters, completely *neglect* their neighbors and the strangers among them. And they *disregard* the *Great Commandment*, the widows and orphans, the immigrant aliens that they themselves once were.

We may need to retune our ears to hear what Jesus is saying today. It's no wonder that woe is us if we treat a prophet like a prophet. Because we'll suffer a prophet's fate! Never mind that we are all supposed to *be* prophets to begin with, boldly speaking our truth to power. If we treat the virtuous as virtuous, we can kiss our future goodbye! Because that would mean *we* were virtuous – as we *should* be. Of course "virtue is its *own* reward," because there really isn't any other "reward" for living as we ought to in today's world of absolute pettiness and polarization.

We might want to thoughtfully take to heart that rather startling end of Jesus' sermonizing today too. Because, when we carefully listen to the context of this teaching, Jesus isn't suddenly interjecting an off-the-subject piece about children. This is a "whole," a paragraph, a *complete* pericope of teaching. **The "little ones" are the disciples** – the learners, the imitators of the teacher. And those "little ones," in the context of the pericope, *are* the prophets and the virtuous. They are those who "follow" the way of Jesus – the way of the cross.

Which is not to say that a good and faithful life necessarily leads to an early and horrendous death, *or* that living as we are *supposed* to live is without joy. But it *is* to say, in a very *real* sense, that "virtue *is* its own reward."

Which is kinda what Paul is attempting to explain to the people of Rome today.

And too, presumably, the Elisha story that was our first reading. Though I have to admit to hearing it with new ears and questioning its moral. Perhaps because this is Trump's America and this is our Independence Day weekend. Sounds like there is that rich woman who decides to buy her own prophet. Husband married into money, so he has no say in the matter. And the prophet allows himself to be bought because he enjoys the good life of getting off the road and into the lap of luxury. So he rewards, or maybe takes advantage of, the rich. (I'm not sure if giving birth to a child you're too old to take care of is a reward.) And, as the story continues, she gave the kid to the temple priest to raise. Which is supposed to be virtuous, apparently, but could certainly be seen as child neglect.

OK, so maybe I'm misreading the scriptures. Or maybe I'm misreading the Trumpeteers. But I sure as heck have lost whatever pride I had left in my American status as of this past November.

In somewhat the same way as I have lost pride in being saved from my sins through the taking of an innocent man's life at the whim of a vindictive god who purportedly claims to be all loving and all forgiving while continuing to satisfy some deep-seated blood lust at the expense of the most virtuous and prophetic among us.

The God beyond all names that we celebrate at Therese is the God we hear extolled by today's psalmist. That Divine Power which is our very Breath of Life simply loves us. And sets us free. So let's stop naming God and listen more attentively to the name we are Divinely called by. Let's stop blaming God and live more responsibly as people of Divine and eternal origin. And let us prophetically proclaim: ***Forever I will sing the goodness of my God.***

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