

Pentecost Sunday
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

May 24, 2015
Rev. Paul Moore

Living in the Spirit

In 2001 Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, MD published a splendid little audio book called, The Will to Live, and other Mysteries. In it she exquisitely and carefully documents a life-force within each one of us that can sometimes achieve amazing medical results. She tells about cancer patients with no medical chance of recovery going into remission for life; people with incurable diseases finding health and vitality once again. When that essential drive to live is hampered, impaired or absent the chances of a patient's recovery become very, very small. She tells a couple of stories about the tragic deaths of patients who really had a chance, when their will to live broke down on them when most needed. It's an interesting proposition that within each of us there is a drive toward life, health and vitality. We seem to innately know that this life-force is the one essential ingredient, and without it we die. Even those of us who are not seriously ill know deep in our bones, there is something within us that craves life. When life is less than what we know it could be we grow anxious, excited, or depressed, and we go to enormous lengths to make it OK again.

The People of Israel almost lost their will to live. When Hebrews first came out of Egypt they developed a style of living that reflected the great experience of the Exodus. As a band of escaped slaves, they saw one another as equals. To treat one another as equals was to treat one another righteously. This was the first pillar of early Yahwistic worship. As a band of slaves whom God had rescued, they felt a deep sensitivity to others who were powerless, the widows, the orphans, the aliens among them. To care for the needy was to pass on what they had received. This was the second pillar of early Yahwistic worship. They gathered at Gilgal and Shiloh to tell the story, to offer thanks to God and to commit themselves once more to the first two pillars. But after King David they had forgotten these things. An attitude of equality doesn't sit well with kings, and they tended to expand their power rather than restrict it. Caring for the needy is expensive and takes away from the cost of war and building programs. A worship that emphasized these two inconvenient ideas was quickly monopolized by the monarchy and diverted to more convenient ends. The loss of these cardinal and godly principles left them ungrounded and vulnerable. They had been carried off into captivity by the Babylonians in the 6th century before Christ. They were far away from Jerusalem, the center of the monarchy and the locus of the Temple. They felt as if there was nothing to live for.

Then the unexpected happened. Cyrus, king of Persia, overthrew the Babylonians. Cyrus had a different attitude toward conquered peoples. He allowed the Jews to return

to Palestine to set up a vassal state as a buffer against Egypt. They could have a limited degree of self-government and they could worship as they wished. The prophet Ezekiel describes the experience in today's first lesson. He is led in a vision to a valley full of dry bones, and told to prophesy to the bones. He was to call the four winds, the breath of God, the Spirit of God, to enter once more into these bones and they would live. The prophecy goes on to say how the Israelites felt like the dry bones, but God was doing something miraculous, something amazing to restore them to life.

The great opportunity did not quite pan out like they had hoped. One would think, then, that when the people got back to Israel that they would have learned their lesson, but they fell to fighting among themselves. What they set up fell quickly into the same errors. People sought places of power over their brothers and sisters and people failed to care for the needy. By the time of Jesus the Pharisees were the up-and-coming party. They took an attitude toward the Torah that elevated it almost to the level of God. Rather than righteousness and compassion as ways of treating one another, righteousness became an obsession with not breaking the law. Compassion became ritualized and regularized so that it could be made to fit into the structure that was understood to be the Law. Worship co-opted the two principles it was supposed to support. Once again the people were in bondage. They may as well have been back in Egypt.

Into this scene comes a New Act of God. Like the Exodus, this is initiated entirely by God. Jesus, God incarnate, is born as a human. He lives his life in radical righteousness and compassion. His life IS worship. This is too threatening to the powerbases, so they kill him. Three days later his disciples claim that death could not hold him. This man's life was more than what the cross could kill, more than what the Roman seal on the tomb could hold. But this is not all. This time the Spirit of God is sent among the people. The coming of the Spirit teaches people to live in radical of believers given to radical righteousness and compassion. It fills them with life that feels like life from death, just like their Master, and as promised in Ezekiel's vision of the Dry Bones.

The Spirit continues to do these things for us. What the Spirit teaches, as we see in Scripture, is a new expression of a timeless and ancient truth. Just as the Ancient Hebrews were led to treat one another in righteousness and compassion, so the Spirit teaches the Church to live in righteousness and compassion, adapting the ancient truths to the needs and reality of each time and age. Yet always the same truths stand: When we treat one another as less or more, creating rankings that we link to our egos, when we forget the poor and needy, the alien and the widow, the powerless and oppressed, we cut ourselves off from the Spirit of God. To cut ourselves off from God makes us a self-contradiction. We wither away in our own self-preoccupation. When we treat one another in righteousness (equality) and compassion (love) we work in harmony with the

very Spirit of God, the fountain of our own existence. Like with Dr. Remen's patients, there is very little that cannot be done! The very principle of the Life of God is active among and within us.

How, then, do we live? If the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth, and if just as in Jesus' day, the Spirit was behind Jesus' making present ancient truths in new ways, then the ancient truths must be incarnated in our day in ways that speak the same truth about God.

The Spirit of God on this Pentecost Day calls us to radical righteousness. Humility, as Bishop Bloom said, comes from the same root as "humus," or rich earth. It is an exercise in truth telling. It is being who you really are, and not who you are not, and it is seeing one another as who they really are and not who we fear or hope they might be. Who are we? Like the ancient Hebrews, we are escaped slaves. By God's grace we have what we have and are what we are. Grateful for what is rather than what could have been, we are all in the same boat called mercy. Nobody's path is better or worse than ours, nobody's path is more or less valid than ours. We are what we are, thanks be to God! Radical righteousness today means to seek the divine presence in the heart of one another, to withhold judgment, and to walk humbly with one another.

The Spirit of God this Pentecost Day calls us to radical compassion. Compassion means to share another's passion—another's feeling, another's life. It is an act of selfless surrender, of self-giving. It is recognizing that we're all in this boat together, and what happens to you happens to me. What is it that happens? Like the ancient Hebrews, we have all been released from the House of Bondage. We are all broken and imperfect, and yet in our time of need God came through for us. The only true response is to be there for the one who is still dispossessed—the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the poor, the needy, those in prison—all those who now live the need we all have or continue to know. As God was there for us, we must be there for others. Thanks be to God! Radical compassion today means that we live in a vast network of relationships, human and otherwise. A rip in the fabric of existence affects us all and requires a response from all; a response to serve the divine presence especially in the rips and tears of life.

The Spirit of God on this Pentecost Day calls us to courage. These things run against the current of society. There is a god of this world. This god honors some more than others; considers some less worthy or valid than others. This god demands injustice. This god requires inequality. The temple of that god can be found everywhere. It is to be found where people get ahead by walking on another's back. It is to be found where a society walls out the needy for fear of having to share. It is found everywhere some are marginalized merely because they are different. It is Egypt, the House of Bondage, and Egypt is everywhere. Our God is not that god. Our God has called us out of the House

of Bondage to a radically different way of being, and through the Holy Spirit teaches and empowers us to stand before our God. In the Church no one should be excluded—it matters not how we were raised, it matters not what social conventions are. Here, all are equal. For the Church no one's needs should go unnoticed. It matters not if they can be blamed for creating their own problems. It matters not who "ought" to meet their need. Here, all are important.

No, we don't always do it well or even get it right, but when we stand here in the presence of God we hear the call of the Spirit, we respond in intention, and we trust God for the guidance, the strength and the courage to live in righteousness and compassion in our broken, unjust and unequal world.