

PENTECOST, 2018

Acts 2.1-21

Pentecost got its name from being 50 days after the festival of Passover, the Jewish “Independence Day” of liberation from slavery in Egypt. It celebrated God’s gift of the Law at Mt. Sinai. The Law was the foundation of their life, teaching the Jews how to live as a free people and be a holy nation.

On this particular Pentecost, something new happened. The Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples gathered in Jerusalem. They begin to proclaim the Gospel in different languages. This sets the stage for Peter’s sermon which interprets what is happening. Using a prophecy from the Old Testament, Peter explains that God is pouring out His Spirit on all people. Everyone – young and old, men and women, of any class – will be given the Spirit. They will be open to new visions for the future.

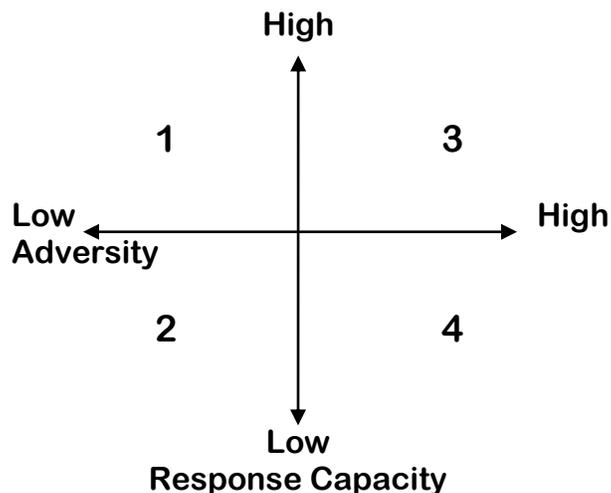
It is the heart of the Pentecost story: the giving of the Holy Spirit to that early band of Christians in Jerusalem, which launched the Church into the world on its mission of the Gospel. Those early Christians were a very small community in a world that knew little to nothing of the story of God and His people. As Peter says in his speech to the crowd, God has opened the way to salvation for all the world. And, in a few centuries, that message, the Gospel, changed the world.

In pouring out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost God gave the Church, gave the world hope. The Church, living in the power of the Spirit, introduced the world to God’s future, full of hope and love. The giving of the Holy Spirit enables the Church to witness to Jesus as Lord. Pentecost is the Church living in the power of the Spirit. I want to explore this theme in our readings today.

To do this, I want to use a visual aid. It is a graph, showing the interplay of conditions we may face and our capacity to respond to them. (Adapted from Ed Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, p. 201).

The horizontal axis measures the level of stress and adversity you are facing in a situation. The vertical axis is your resources and capacity to respond in a positive, healthy way to your situation. The

higher you go on the scale, the greater your ability to respond to adversity with confidence, faith, and hope. The four quadrants indicate different types of responses to situations.



In Quadrant One are people whose outlook could be called, “Don’t worry, be happy.” These people sail through most situations they face in life. Their stress level is low and their response capacity is high. So to them dealing with problems is “a piece of cake.”

By contrast, people or churches in quadrant two go to pieces at the smallest problem. This is the “Chicken Little” reaction: “The sky is falling, the sky is falling.” Because their capacity for healthy response is not high, even small problems are big problems.

Quadrant Four people are the most miserable of all. When the going gets rough, they crumble in despair. They see themselves as helpless victims of circumstances. Lacking the resources and capacity to respond well, they focus on weaknesses, problems, and conditions.

Then there are quadrant three churches and persons. Their motto is: When the going gets tough, the tough get going. They have the spiritual resources to rise above their circumstances. They can act decisively with faith, hope, courage, and the ability to love. They see their situation as a challenge to be met, not a disaster to run away from. This response is like that of St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians. Writing from prison – not a happy place, to be sure – Paul says, “What has happened

to me has served to advance the Gospel.... in whatever state I am, I have learned to be content.”

What God does in giving the Holy Spirit is to elevate our capacity to respond to challenges with courage, faith, and hope. We see this in all of our readings today.

The first reading is the famous vision of the “Valley of Dry Bones” from the prophet Ezekiel. He lived in one of the bleakest times in Jewish history, the Babylon Exile some 550 years before Christ. God shows Ezekiel a vision of a valley of dry bones. He tells Ezekiel to prophesy a word of hope. The bones take on flesh. Then God puts His Spirit in them, and they return to life.

The vision is a picture of the situation of the Jews in exile in Babylon. “Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost,” they say. God’s people were focused only on their situation. They saw only problems and obstacles. But God through His prophet spoke His Word of life. God lifts their vision to the future He prepares for them. By His Word and Spirit, God elevates their capacity for a response of faith and hope.

In the reading from Acts, which I already referred to, we see Jesus’ disciples boldly witnessing that Jesus is Lord and confidently proclaiming the Gospel. This was the same group of spineless cowards who fled from the cross of Christ and after the cross covered in fear of their opponents in the upper room. Now at Pentecost God had given them the Holy Spirit, and in the power of the Spirit their outlook had moved from focusing on their situation of problems and weaknesses, to seeing opportunities to make the Gospel of Jesus known.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus speaks to His disciples on the night before He died. He is about to be taken from them and killed. The future seems bleak and uncertain. It is wholly natural that the disciples would be fearful of their situation and anxious about the future they were facing.

What does Jesus do? He focuses, not on their situation, but on the resources God will give them to deal with it. Jesus promises them the Holy Spirit, who will guide and keep them in the truth. The Spirit is also called “the Advocate,” one who takes up the cause of another, like a lawyer defending a client. Another term for the Holy Spirit is “Paraclete.” The word means “one who is called alongside,” someone who goes beside us in our journey of faith and witness to Christ.

Another word used for the Holy Spirit is “Comforter.” This is not “comforting” as we think of it in our day, as consoling or sympathizing with people in distress. It is more like a tapestry in a church in Caen, France that tells the story of the Norman conquest of England in 1066. In one scene, William the Conqueror is marching with his troops, sword drawn, prodding them on. Beneath the picture are the words, “King William comforteth his soldiers.”

The tapestry shows a different side of comfort: to urge on, to prod, to encourage (which means to give someone courage). It is a much more active, goal-oriented idea. That image of prodding the troops into battle is a good one for the Holy Spirit and the Church. The Spirit’s “comfort” is not making us “comfortable”; it is like a sword pricking us in the side, goading us to action. The Holy Spirit is God’s presence, prodding us to action. The Holy Spirit “comforteth” God’s people.

In all the scripture readings today, we see God’s people moving from focusing on their conditions, on weakness, on problems to living with hope and responding with confidence in the power of the Spirit. This can be your story, too. In Baptism you were given the Holy Spirit. Through God’s Word and the sacramental life of the Church the Holy Spirit nourishes faith and guides you in love. It is the challenge of the Christian life to elevate your ability to respond to adversity with courage and hope. God has given you the resources to do this. So as Luther’s hymn prays,

*Come, Holy Spirit, God and Lord.
Be all Your gifts in plenty poured,
To save, to strengthen, and make whole.
Amen.*