

PENTECOST: IN SEARCH OF SPIRITUALITY

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If we listen attentively, we shall hear,
amid the uproar of empires and nations, a
faint flutter, the gentle stirring of life and hope
-Albert Camus

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man conceived,
What God has prepared for those
 who love him,
God has revealed to us through the Spirit.
For the Spirit searches everthing,
 even the depths of God.
-I Corinthians 2:9-10

In his novel, *The Final Beast*, Frederick Buechner tells about the Reverend Theodore Nicolet who passes his church's bulletin board which reads: "Pentecost: The Birthday of the Church, 11:00 A.M. Sunday." Later in the novel, Mr. Nicolet envisions what will happen after the service: "They would file past, shaking his hand. 'It was so lovely, so spiritual . . . A fine message . . . You really put it to us that time, Nick . . .'"¹

How would you feel if someone greeted you at the door following worship with the remark: "You had a spiritual sermon today, preacher"? Most of us in mainline churches would be ambivalent about such a comment. What does it mean to preach a "spiritual" sermon? It is a reasonable question to ask in a discussion of preaching during Pentecost. Even though we observe Pentecost as an important event in the Christian year, we are ambivalent about spirituality.

Our ambivalence about spirituality is not confined to our image of wild worship services among Pentecostals, charismatics, or other "sects," which make most mainline preachers shutter. There is also a historical hesitancy to embrace spirituality which grows out of an embarrassment over "the distinctive doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States." Dr. E.T. Thompson's discussion of "the spirituality of the church" is a valuable reminder of how our ancestors hid behind "spirituality" to avoid addressing the issue of slavery from the pulpit. The result was a defense of slavery. James Henley Thornwell argued that as a spiritual body the church should not interfere with civil relations, but concentrate on "spiritual influences."² Such arguments have modern equivalents which suggest that the primary role of the church is to

establish "homogeneous" congregations or to address "spiritual" issues while the world struggles to avoid nuclear holocaust, racial conflict, and starvation.

The attempt to divide "spiritual" issues from mundane matters such as economics and human relations reflects a dualism which denies the essence of the incarnation. Any search for spirituality places us in the company of Jesus of Nazareth who began his ministry with this text: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has annointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19). The Spirit which annointed Jesus to address the Good News to the oppressed and the poor does not allow us to privatize our spiritual experience. The Spirit of the Lord leads us in mission.

In spite of an uneasiness about the roads down which searches for spirituality have led, there is a renewed interest in the spiritual life. Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest, who until recently taught at Yale, has been the leader in the quest for a new spirituality. The new quest is a recognition that our resources are inadequate for the tasks of preaching and living in a world flirting with self-destruction. Nouwen suggests, "There is a great hunger for a new spirituality that is a new experience of God in our own lives."³ According to Nouwen, this hunger grows out of the separation between professionalism and spirituality which is the main reason for the many frustrations, pains and disappointments in the life of numerous Christian ministers. He argues that the development of professional skills as valuable as they may be are no substitute for the development of a spiritual life with personal faith and insight into life at the core.⁴

Another leader in the search for Spirituality is the novelist and preacher, Frederick Buechner. In *The Final Beast*, the young minister, Theodore Nicolet asks a parishioner, Clem Vail: "Why do you want to join a church? You believe in God or something?"

"Do You?" Clem Vail responded surprised at his own question since he had no real reason for asking it.

"Sometimes I believe in the hot breath down my neck."

"I suppose if somebody was breathing down my neck," Clem said, "I'd believe in that, too."

"Somebody probably is."

"I've never gone in too much for the Holy Ghost."

"Well, I'm sure the feeling's mutual."⁵

The "spirit" means breath or wind so we are dependent upon it and surrounded by it. And yet, like Clem, we've never gone in too much for the Holy Ghost. Paul Tillich points out the dilemma:

. . . The use of the term "Holy Ghost" produces an impression of great remoteness from our way of speaking and thinking. But spiritual experience is a reality for everyone, as actual as the experience of being loved or the breathing of air. Therefore, we should not shy away from the word Spirit. . . . for this is what Divine Spirit means: God present to our spirit.⁶

Women and men from all walks of life seek a dimension to life which enables them to survive and to make some sense out of their lives. This desperate search has led to some bizarre experiments in an attempt to experience the Divine Spirit. What our search suggests is that the Spirit is not to be found on the periphery but in the middle of our chaotic lives, where we are increasingly aware of the permanent threat of total destruction and cry desperately for a new spirituality which enables us to come to terms with our search for meaning. It is at the center of life we experience somebody breathing down our neck. Spiritual preaching hears the desperate cry and the breath on our neck.

Prayer, study, and meditation are traditional ways of nourishing the spirit. What Nouwen does is to go beyond the "how to" exercises to describe the reality which is vital for the spiritual life. It is "to experience the transcendent Spirit of God." Transcendence enables us "to break the boundaries of our imprisoned world which frees us for the discovery of God's life-giving Spirit in the midst of this maddening world." The freedom to perceive what God is doing in the world is the essence of true spirituality. It is like putting on a hearing-aid which enables one to hear a deeper dimension to life. Nouwen believes the function of ministry and the practice of spirituality come together when we are able to hear the sounds which break through the chains of death and destruction and create new life which can be affirmed.⁷

An example of what Henri Nouwen wants to encourage is found in the movie "My Dinner with Andre." The movie is a simple story of a dinner between two old friends. All the action takes place during a two hour conversation in a restaurant. Wally is reluctantly keeping a dinner date with Andre because he has heard that Andre has engaged in strange behavior, talking to trees and animals and weeping at inappropriate times. As the dinner begins it appears that the reports are accurate that Andre has lost touch with reality. However, as the dinner conversation progresses it becomes apparent that Andre is in search of a lost language to overcome the boredom and despair that plagues many people who are playing prescribed roles which cut them off from the meaning of their lives.

Andre and Wally are playwrights and actors by profession. Andre complains that their profession has succumbed to conventional wisdom by describing vividly the raw experiences which characterize contemporary life. These portrayals confirm the feelings of being powerless to do anything about the tragic quality of life. In contrast, Andre describes an experience with a group of unemployed actors in Poland. At the conclusion of a workshop, the group performs a baptism of Andre in which they give him a new name. The effect of the joyful ritual is to lift Andre's spirit and give him a new perception of reality.

As the movie closes, Wally is riding home through the streets of New York where he has grown up. Passing a familiar clothing store, Wally suddenly remembers the day his father took him there to buy his first suit. An ice cream parlor which Wally routinely passed is suddenly alive with memories of ice cream sodas shared with classmates and friends. The dinner has empowered Wally with a new perception of reality which revives his spirit. It is not an easy transformation for Wally as he has been content with conventional wisdom

which defines reality as one dimensional. Andre invites him to perceive reality from another dimension.

The story of Pentecost offers a similar transformation. The Spirit enabled people who spoke in different languages to understand each other. The search for spirituality involves the discovery of a lost language which uses the imagination to remember, to hear, to see, to feel, to perceive a new reality which preserves our humanity.

The television advertisement suggests that the ability to reproduce information, even an ancient manuscript, by a copying machine is a miracle. There are many useful functions that machines can do for us but they cannot tell us who we are. The lost language of transcendence introduces us to a new reality about ourselves. This is the sound of the Spirit—"Somebody breathing down our neck."

Henry Nouwen and Frederick Buechner want us to hear this language because it is essential for preaching and living with an authentic spirituality. Nouwen says "the spiritual life is a life in which we struggle to move from absurd living to obedient living." He points out that absurd contains the word *surdus* which means "deaf" so that absurd living is remaining deaf to the Spirit. According to Nouwen the world in which we live conspires against our hearing in order to make us deaf. Deafness leads to a life filled with events without fulfillment—"busy yet bored, involved yet lonely." These symptoms of the absurd life mean that we are painfully cut off from the vital source of our existence—God's life-giving spirit. In contrast the spiritual life is characterized by obedience which includes the word *audire* which means "listening." "Living a spiritually mature life is living a life in which we listen to the voice of God's Spirit within and among us . . . To be obedient means to be constantly attentive to this active presence of God."⁸

How do we hear the voice of God in our lives? Nouwen suggests the three disciplines of the Spiritual Life: The Church, The Book and the Heart. Spiritual preaching draws from all three sources as we listen for and help others to hear what Peter Berger calls signals of transcendence: "phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our natural reality but that appear to point beyond that reality."⁹

At times the sounds are clear for all to hear. Our time seems to be one in which we must strain to get a signal of transcendence. Listen as Arthur Yereance who is 92 years old describes such a signal:

"Sometime ago I was looking toward the west as the sun slowly disappeared behind the treetops. It was a strange feeling that possessed me as I watched the sun disappear. My mind was free of thoughts. I was marvelling at the beauty of it all when suddenly this thought came to mind—losing sight of the sun with its warmth was like losing a dear friend. As this thought lingered, bringing with it the sorrow that accompanies such happenings, the sky turned a beautiful pink. The glow spread across the whole horizon and it seemed to me God was telling those who listen that going home is beautiful, that the warmth of God's love is ever present and its glow is like the glow of the beautiful sunset."¹⁰

Another illustration comes again from *The Final Beast* as Buechner de-

scribes Theodore Nicolet stretching out on the grass near his father's barn:

Two apple branches struck against each other with the limber clack of wood on wood. That was all—a tick-tock rattle of branches—but then a fierce lurch of excitement at what was only daybreak, only the smell of summer coming, only starting back again for home, but oh Jesus, he thought, with a great lump in his throat and a crazy grin, it was an agony of gladness and beauty falling wild and soft like rain. Just clack-clack, but praise him, he thought Praise him. Maybe all his journeying, he thought, had been only to bring him here to hear two branches hit each other twice like that, to see nothing cross the threshold but to see the threshold, to hear the dry clack-clack of the world's tongue at the approach of spendor.¹¹

For those who have ears to hear in the desperate cry of the poor, or a faint flutter of hope or the clack-clack of two apple branches, there is the voice of God's Spirit breathing down our neck and breathing new life into sermons and lives. Such listening is at the heart of a search for spirituality.

And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave again and arms are strong.
Allelulia! Allelulia!¹²

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Final Beast* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), p. 175.

² Ernest Trice Thompson, *The Spirituality of the Church* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1961), p. 25.

³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry* (New York: Image Books, 1971), p. xxiii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

⁵ Buechner, *op. cit.* p. 27.

⁶ Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 85.

⁷ Nouwen, *op. cit.* p. 117.

⁸ Henri J.M. Nouwen, "Spiritual Director", *Reflection*, Volume 78, No. 2, January, 1981. p. 7-8.

⁹ Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City, Doubleday, 1970) p. 65.

¹⁰ From a Letter to the editor in *The Charlotte Observer*, February 25, 1982.

¹¹ Buechner, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-178.

¹² *The Hymbook*, "For All the Saints Who from Their Labors Rest," p. 358.