

Louisville Seminary Baccalaureate Service, 19 May 2013

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Psalm 104: 24-34 and Acts 2:1-21

Good morning graduates! And a warm welcome to all the families and friends who surround you in a spirit of thanksgiving, pride, and love. Morning has finally broken on this long-awaited and special day that some of you have been counting down to for a few months now. It's a great day – one to celebrate and to savor, one filled to overflowing with a lot of feeling. Days like today are full ones where the line between tears of happiness and tears of sadness literally gets blurry. Ready as you may be to “launch” from this place, leave-taking comes with the loss of what you have valued about your time here. Excited as you may be embark on the next step, you may also long to stay close to dear friends, continue in familiar routines, and take just one more class. Or not.

The NT lesson we heard a few moments ago from the book of Acts reminds us that today is a special day in the life of the church as well. The story we know as Pentecost takes us back to a day long-awaited by a small group of Galileans who had said goodbye to the resurrected Jesus for the last time and were understandably anxious about what would come next.

This is also a special day in the city of Louisville, one that has been long anticipated by the many persons who have made possible the visit of one of the world's great spiritual leaders, the Tibetan Buddhist, the Dalai Lama. While most of us here at the seminary were caught up in the busyness of finals this past week, a Festival of Faiths event, centered around the theme of sacred silence as a pathway to compassion was going on in preparation of this visit. During the one event I attended, I found myself in a long line that included a lot of Presbyterians. As the woman ahead of me quipped, “what's with all these Presbyterians looking for a place to talk about silence!”

It was helpful to reflect on how God communes with us in silence. But as we've already experienced this morning, God also speaks to us through prayerfully crafted liturgy, scripture, songs, the symbols of bread and wine – and through each one of you here.

As you may or may not be aware, the Dalai Lama will be speaking early this afternoon on the topic “engaging compassion” in response to the city of Louisville's participation in the international Charter for Compassion movement. Louisville signed onto this movement about a year ago, making a long-term

commitment that is already cultivating 'Youth Ambassadors for Compassion' throughout the public and private school system and persons of all faiths are learning to live, work, and play peacefully together.

“Engaging compassion” seems a fitting theme for this day. As some of you may recall, a couple of years ago I preached a sermon on blessings and benedictions and confessed that since my college days they have been among my favorite parts of a worship service. Not just because they are short, although that doesn’t hurt. I think it’s because, like poetry, in a few sentences and phrases, benedictions go straight to the “heart of the matter;” they seem to speak directly to the heart. At least that’s been my experience more often than not. I still remember the first time I heard professor Dianne Reistroffer bless us in this chapel with the prayer of the 16th century Spanish Saint, Teresa of Avila:

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Hearing this for the first time I identified with the words of Emily Dickinson who wrote: "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry." I would say, that’s when I know that I’m on holy ground. That morning here in Caldwell chapel (and not for the first or only time), I felt physically the presence of the living spirit of Jesus. While I find the whole prayer powerful, the line that I want to linger over this morning is “yours are the eyes with which Christ looks compassion on this world.” We live in a world that desperately needs all the compassion that we can bring to it. And I believe that each and every one of you has an abundance of it to give. Thanks be to God!

Although neither of today’s biblical texts explicitly contains the word “compassion,” I believe that these are the eyes through which the writers wrote and

the narrators speak. The word compassion means literally to “suffer with.” In a more complete way, compassion calls us to embrace our full humanity and in the words of the apostle Paul in Romans “to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.” (Rom 12:15) That is a sacred calling in which we all are invited to participate.

I was recently reminded of the fact that in the end, all forms of ministry are about the relationship, about connecting with others in kind, meaningful, playful, honest, and sometimes challenging ways. Ultimately that is what the biblical story is, a love story of God’s desire to be in relationship with us and our response to God’s overtures. I invite us for the next few moments to look through the eyes of compassion at that wild story in the second chapter of Acts that stretches our imaginations to the limit.

At the point that we enter the story in Acts chapter 2, the followers of Jesus had already been through a series of life-changing experiences that we can read all about in Luke and the other three gospels. Having said goodbye to Jesus for the last time, we find the apostles struggling to move on without their beloved leader and teacher. Not unlike you graduates today, during the past few years they had been summoned out of other lines of work and associations to follow Jesus. In his company they had been to the mountaintop – and they had dipped pretty far down into valleys of disappointment and despair. They had had some great class discussions – and ones that left them confused, even angry, and more often than not with more questions than answers. They had an abundance of cherished memories – and ones they were not so proud of and glad to leave behind. They were preparing for yet another transition before they had had time to fully absorb the meaning of what they had already been through. In this in-between time, like most of us, they vacillated between periods of prayer and trust in the promises Jesus had made to them, and moments when waves of anxiety threatened to choke off the free-flowing breath of life.

My sense is that the apostles were as surprised as anybody by what happened to them that morning during the middle of the Jewish harvest festival of Pentecost, named because it came on the 50th day after the beginning of Passover. I don’t pretend to grasp the full meaning of that dramatic day and I would be suspicious of anyone who thinks they can. But seen through the eyes of compassion, it strikes me that what is behind the miraculous capacity for the apostles to speak and be heard in the native language of so many different kinds of people is the yearning of God to communicate love. To quote the title from Gene March’s lovely book, *The Wide, Wide Circle of Divine Love* for all people is of such breadth and depth that it

cannot be contained by any single language (or even “four love languages”), but is spoken and heard in multiple languages, transcending the usual boundaries of communication. The roar of the wind and the tongues like fire are expressions of the intensity of God’s desire to be seen, heard, known, and felt to be present among them. I would posit that there were plenty of people that day who felt physically as if the top of their heads were taken off. They were on holy ground.

To reinforce this astounding breadth of God’s embrace, in the first part of his first sermon, Peter falls back on some of the most beautiful and inclusive – and subversive lines in all of Scripture taken from the prophet Joel:

In the last days it will be, God declares,
That I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

Here Peter affirms other languages in which God speaks – in the poetry of prophecies, in visions, and dreams. This is God again being multi-lingual and speaking to our multiple intelligences! This spirit of divine love and presence, gladness and new life is poured out on all flesh. Not just sprinkled or dribbled down, but **POURED OUT**. And not on just a few select persons here or there, but on **ALL** flesh – girls and boys, men and women, old and young, free and enslaved are all **DRENCHED** in the love of God – so that they – and we – might know the ways of life.

Notice that this baptism by the Holy Spirit occurred while they were *all together in one place*. The Spirit came to them as a community, not just individually. The Spirit did not come in a still small voice to each person sitting in their own separate room, nor did it descend quietly like a dove. It came with force and fire and erupted in energy and words. It was about breaking through and down barriers that superficially divide us; it was about creating and restoring relationships. God communicated to and through the apostles to anyone who would listen. **Theirs were the eyes with which Christ looked compassion on this world; theirs were the mouths that spoke the life-giving good news of Jesus Christ to a dispirited and broken world.**

Psalm 104 makes a fascinating companion to this story in Acts. Like the coming of the spirit at Pentecost, in the words of one Old Testament scholar, “Psalm 104

explodes with poetic energy. There is nothing serenely ‘meditative’ about it. The poem bursts at the seams with joy as it celebrates creation’s manifold nature.”¹

Like a songbird itself, this psalm soars over the earth reminding us that we are not only to be in communion with our fellow human beings. It pulls us back into the family of things. In ways we can understand and in ways we may never, it suggests that our salvation and wholeness is tied up with the rest of creation. Who of us wants to imagine our life without the chorus of spring birds, the companionship of beloved pets, the sweet scent of honeysuckle and roses, cool lakes and oceans in which to play on hot summer days, mountains that inspire, and trees that shelter and shade? Cattle, plants, and people share the earth. Ships and whales share the sea. All creatures are created by and depend, and *interdepend*, on God’s breath, the spirit of life. Ours are the eyes with which Christ looks with delight and compassion on this world, the whole world.

We all know that nature like people can be cruel and wreck massive destruction. But the spirit of this psalm and of this day is one of rejoicing in the goodness, beauty, breathtaking abundance, and diversity of God’s creation! We know all too well that our world is painfully problem saturated, and that relationships can break our hearts as well as heal them and that not all our dreams will be fulfilled. But this morning we are reminded that seen through the eyes of compassion, the world is [definitively] saturated with the gracious spirit of the living, loving, creating and re-creating God. This Holy Spirit flows through and connects us together in a wondrous web across time and distance wherever we go from here.

This holy, abundant spirit gives us the capacity to speak and to listen in the multiple languages of love. It sends us forth to nurture one another’s dreams and creativity; it gives us permission to weep – and to dance with joy. Life in the Spirit is participation in the “waterwheel of love,” taking in the love of God and pouring it out onto all others. May we let it this wondrous Spirit stretch our imaginations and bodies, open our minds, and fill our hearts with gladness! Thanks be to God!

¹ Brown, William P. *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 144.