

“The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.” When you hear these words, do you imagine yourself changing water into wine? Do you see yourself feeding 5,000 people? Bringing sight to the blind?

Let me tell you a story: I have a friend who is Lakota Sioux. As a part of his religious upbringing, he went on a vision quest to seek a spirit guide. The Lakota recognize that, because the Spirit of the Creator is in all things, anything on Mother Earth can be a spirit guide. Frequently spirit guides are animals. You don't choose an animal to be your spirit guide, the guide chooses you. Now, my friend knew that, but he was young and could not help but hope that some mighty animal would choose him: a bear, a cougar or a buffalo.

After a sweat-lodge and prayer ceremony, he went to the clearing prepared for him and he waited. A day went by with no food or water, and then another. Nothing. No horse, no raven, no wolf—no sign of any spirit guide at all. Until the afternoon of the third day. Finally, a guide revealed itself and offered its friendship. Here, at last, was his spirit guide: a tiny hummingbird.

Not the most imposing of animal guides at first blush. How in the world could this tiny creature be of any help with my friend's desire to help heal the deep wounds etched into Mother Earth? What guidance could this little bird offer about reconciling racial and ethnic divisions, let alone dissolve the pervasive political-economic powers that held back his family and friends?

In the Lakotas' experience, connecting with an animal guide helps make people healthier physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. But they also teach that there is so much more for those with the patience to pursue the relationship, because even the smallest of God's creatures has colossal skills and wisdom to offer. My friend's wee hummingbird has been enormously helpful to him.

In much the same way, if we reduce John's Gospel message to a simple “feel-better” message, we miss the deeper teaching. The church faces enormous hurdles. And, despite some popular spirituality, our Scripture never actually promises that God will not give us a greater burden than we can

handle. Not only will we undergo hardships, some of them will absolutely be more than we can handle.

What God *does* promise is to be our help and our strength at all times; what God promises is to be present to sustain us and to be at work in our lives, regardless of what comes. The sheer magnitude of the pain, divisiveness and dishonesty in the world can be overwhelming. The promise of the peace that Jesus gives does not deny the distress all around us nor is the promise that suffering will somehow just go away. The promise is that we are not alone in what we have ahead of us. *God is with us!*

John's Jesus gives us an image of a collective—a community of truth in a hostile world. The Spirit of truth that is poured out on all flesh is not only the witness, but the power, the wisdom and the comfort of this community. We are organically connected to Christ through our baptism and that relationship is nourished through the Holy Eucharist.

Baptism is founded on two very singular and essential points. The first is that the person covered by the water dies and rises with Christ—that is, they *participate* in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Christian theological writers from the first six or seven centuries are consistently clear on this point. We die and are raised again in baptism.

The second point is that, in that same moment, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell not only among us, but within us—the baptism of fire. Each baptized person becomes an incarnation of God—a unique manifestation of the Spirit. The Divine presence is now in us at the deepest part of us. We carry God within us.

The ancient practice in contemplative Christianity is to seek increasing silence in prayer, trusting that God is deep within us. All of God's wisdom, power and glory is connected with our core—our center. Because we have died and risen with Christ, we need not let our hearts be afraid. If the Divine presence links our deepest selves to the Trinity, what then is there to fear? There is nothing to fear in promoting justice, peace and love—the components of the *shalom* that Jesus left with us. There is nothing to fear in working, praying and giving on behalf of spreading the kingdom of God.

Anglican Archbishop Janani Luwum of Uganda was a leading protester against the excesses of Idi Amin's regime. In the late '70s, he wrote a letter to Amin criticizing acts of violence perpetrated by security services. When the British recognized the growing threat to the Archbishop's life, they offered to help him escape Uganda. He refused, saying that "Jesus himself did not run away from being crucified." A few days later, Luwum was arrested, tortured and returned to his cell. There he prayed with the inmates, urging them to forgive those who had wronged them. He was murdered moments later.

The world does deliver some staggering challenges, for some, even challenges that lead to physical death. Yet we have nothing to fear because the Spirit of God also comes—sometimes like the howling rush of a violent wind and other times like a hummingbird. Regardless of how it comes, the Spirit enables each of us to participate in the Divine nature in unique ways, walking around with God flaming from within our very depths. We are set afire to carry the light of love, peace, hope and forgiveness that God has entrusted to us—given to us for the purpose of giving it away, not like the world gives.

God enkindles that fire within us so that each of us becomes a unique light—a light given for those who have not yet realized that God has come in the flesh to dwell in them as well. How can people trust what they have never experienced? The fire of the Spirit in us brings people who are hungry or homeless or on the margins into the love of God. To encounter God's love is to be set afire.

When you hear Jesus saying that the one who trusts will do the works that Jesus does and even greater, do you imagine that you must die as a martyr like Archbishop Luwum? Are you concerned that you will require the equivalent of a hulking Kodiak bear as your guide? Does that concern cause you to overlook guidance that seems somehow smaller? Maybe the tiny hummingbird you have been given is simply prayer.

Pentecost is a reminder that the Spirit of God manifests in a unique way in each of us. And each unique manifestation conspires with others to bathe the world's fear with love. Did you know that the word "conspire" means "breath together?" So take a deep breath. Now exhale. That's the simplest conspiracy. But to "con-spire" also means to be filled with the same *spirit*—to be enlivened,

that is, by the same wind. And *that* is the Holy conspiracy—breathing with God’s own breath—participating in the Divine nature as we breath together in worship, in song and in prayer.

Prayer may seem a small thing, but it is the answer that Jesus gives to poor sweet Philip’s question. “If in my name you ask for anything, I will do it.” Prayer is the beginning of all our greater works. To intercede, literally “to go between,” means to go to the people to discover their needs and bring these in to God in prayer asking for divine wisdom, mercy and justice. To intercede is also to go to God discerning what God desires for this broken world, and to take wisdom, mercy and justice out to transfigure and renew God’s creation. In and out, we breath what God has freely given.

To pray is to participate in the unity of the triune God. Prayer is the key for making sense of everything else about being a disciple. Jesus does not simply *show* Philip or the rest of us the way to God. Jesus *is* the way, that is to say, Jesus *participates* in God. And through our baptisms of water and fire, so do we. What we *are* in Christ is the point. And what we *are* is an incarnation of God. What we *do*, and what we *think* and *say* are critical but secondary.

The Desert Mothers and Fathers of the first century knew this to be true, and so they passed along teaching stories like this one: One day, a disciple came to the cave of a hermit. “As far as I can,” said the seeker, “I say my little office. I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” The old one stood and stretched sun-spotted hands toward heaven. Ten fingers began to glow like lamps of fire as the sage said to the seeker, “Why not become all flame?”