

This Incredibly Benevolent Force

Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost/ 23rd May 2021

There's a scene in the film *American Beauty* (1999) that came to mind this week that kind of points toward, that indirectly speaks to what Pentecost means for the Church. *American Beauty* is a challenging film; it's not everyone's cup of tea.¹ "It's a story about emptiness."² The film describes two neighborhood middle-class families with beautiful homes on a quiet street, somewhere in an ordinary suburb. Under the surface of modern luxury, however, roils the struggle for meaning in their lives. Each of the characters in the story illustrates the point that beauty is a sham—they all attempt in their own way to rise above the situation, but each comes to a destructive ending. The beauty in this film is not found in luxury or even in the beauty of a rose being grown by one of the characters, Anne—a rose that has no scent. Rather, we get to see beauty through the lens of the boy next door, who has an obsession to film everything he sees on his video camera.

One day he allows the girl next door to look at one of his videos. In a lengthy shot we see his film of a flimsy plastic bag—the kind that many supermarkets these days now charge ten cents for because they're bad for the environment. The bag is picked up by the wind and blown high and low among the red autumn leaves. The moving and swirling of the bag is the beauty that suddenly, amid the foolishness and helplessness of the adults, appears as a gift that the boy and the girl can look at together in great delight. It is this image that provides meaning and cohesion. As they watch the video together, the bag swirling and moving in the air, we hear Ricky say: "It was one of those days when it's a minute away from snowing. And there's this electricity in the air, you can almost hear it. Right? And this bag was just...dancing with me...like a little kid, begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. That's the day I realized that there was this entire life behind things and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know that there was no reason to be afraid...ever."

"Beauty breaks through in the presence of emptiness, a power that presents itself as benevolent."³ I remember the I first saw that scene back in 1999. It took my breath away. It was an experience of recognition. I said to myself, "Yes. That's it. Exactly." I have felt that incredibly benevolent force. I have seen it. The Church—today, of all days—bears witness to it so that others, too, will see and feel and realize that benevolent power.

Power is a word that we find all through the Book of Acts. *Dunamis* in Greek. From which we get "dynamite" in English. Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you..." (Acts 1:8). And then it happened, suddenly. Violent wind. Tongues of fire. Spirit filling. Spirit speaking. Then people speaking. People hearing. Questioning. Moving. Crossing boundaries. Sending. Joining together. Bearing witness. All because of this real, dynamic force unleashed upon the world. Not a destructive power, mind you, or a force that controls, as in political or institutional power. No, this is an enabling power, a force that empowers people to live and act in ways well beyond what they are capable of living and acting on their own or even together as a group. For when the Holy Spirit arrives, we are *given the ability* as the text makes clear—we are given the ability to act and speak and grow and develop

move and be bold and courageous and confident and hopeful. By “we,” I mean you, me, individually, and you and me, together, as the people of the Risen Christ. The Holy Spirit comes to us with power.

Now, whether the Holy Spirit arrived in Jerusalem after Jesus’ ascension, as we have here in Acts 2, or, whether she arrived on Easter when Jesus breathed his Resurrection Spirit into the disciples, as we read in John 20, is beside the point. They both point to the fact that the Spirit was unleashed upon the world, blowing as a gentle breeze to comfort fearful disciples, assuring them of Christ’s ongoing presence, or raging as a strong, violent tempest to challenge, disturb, and ultimately thrust disciples locked away in fear out beyond the confines of an upper room, sending them out beyond Jerusalem to a world waiting to hear the gospel, sent out to introduce the world to the presence of the Risen Christ. Both Luke and John tell us that something happened, and that the presence, power, and purpose of the Holy Spirit was given to disciples to equip and empower them to become apostles, that is, “messengers.” We are a people sent out to continue the ongoing mission of Christ, which is the mission of God, which is the mission of the Church, because a church doesn’t “do” mission, we have a mission.

You see, the Holy Spirit makes Christ present and real to us,
for the Spirit is never separated from Christ.
The Spirit presents us with the very life of Christ.
The Spirit extends Christ to us so that we know that “God is with us” (Is. 7:4; Mt. 1:23).
The Spirit is the life-giver, the giver of resurrection,
who brings new life to the dead parts of our lives,
who bring new life to dead parts of the church,
and ultimately brings us into the
presence of the Resurrected One at the end of our days.

I love the way John Calvin (1509-1564) described the Holy Spirit as a “fountain of life,” as he liked to say, a *fons vitae*, connecting us to the Risen Christ.
The Spirit makes the gospel real, makes the gospel of Christ.
The Spirit gives us faith, not a dead faith but a living, vibrant faith.
The Spirit allows us to confess the faith, live the faith.
The Spirit conveys the love of God.

The Holy Spirit is whispering—and sometimes shouting—to the depths of our spirits
To remind us again and again and again and again that we are beloved children of grace,
children of the covenant forever bound to God.

The Spirit comforts and assures us, gives us strength when we are weak,
calms our nerves when we’re afraid and anxious.

Sometimes the Spirit is an *agent provocateur* who pokes and prods and pushes us
to grow and to *grow up* into mature servants of the Living One.

In order to make this happen the Spirit is continually working, searching, moving within the depths of the psyche to connect us with the unfathomable depths of God. “For the Spirit searches everything,” Paul said, “even the depths of God” (1 Cor. 2:10).

The Spirit, as Paul knew, plumbs the depths of our spirits and prays *for* us, prays *with* us, even when we don’t have the words to pray (Rom. 8:25).

The Spirit groans *with* us—*groans!*—groans *for* us, as Paul says, with sighs too deep for words (Romans 8:26).

The Spirit, our advocate and counselor is at work in us to yield *life*—in us, for us.

True life.

Abundant life.

Hopeful life.

Meaningful life.

God-praising, Christ-serving, sacrificial life.

A life that is even willing to suffer for the sake of God’s love.

You see, the Spirit is the Master Translator, who translates for us—we who were born late in time, more than twenty centuries after Jesus—the meaning, the power, the presence of his life, death, and resurrection, for us today, even now. Without the Spirit, John Calvin (1509-1564) insists, Christ is far removed from us, buried in the past, someone we view remotely, objectively, cold, a “fact” of history to be studied and learned about, instead of one encountered, known, a present reality, Christ with us and for us and within us. Calvin insists, “It is only by his Spirit that he unites himself with us; and by the grace and power of the same Spirit we are made his members...”. Why? So that, “we may mutually enjoy him.”⁴

Through the Spirit the Risen Christ extends his life and resurrection to us. The Holy Spirit raises us up from our own personal tombs of death and decay, all the places where we are dead or stuck or dying within us.

The Holy Spirit is power, fire, energy, vital and vitalizing.

The Holy Spirit is dynamic, moving, swift.

Invisible, like the wind, a wind—sometimes gentle,

sometimes playful, sometimes fierce—

but always good, trying

to bring us to life,

to animate our souls,

then joining us to one another, forging us into new people,

moving our feet forward, sending us to where we don’t wish to go,

crossing borders, breaking boundaries, breaching barriers, breaking taboos,

stretching us in order to get us to stretch out our hands in service, mission, and witness,

causing our hearts through it all to beat faster with joy and love and grace.

When the Holy Spirit is giving life to us in all these ways then we can say the Spirit is bringing life to the Church, a Church that God is trying to take some place, moving us along, empowering us and inspiring us to become God’s people.

People love to say these days that the Church is dying. Perhaps it is. There's much about the Protestant Church of the past sixty years that might need to die or needs changing. Some say Christianity is dying. Perhaps. Its message doesn't seem to connect with folks the way it used to. This is true. Change is inevitable, it's natural. We can resist the change—which the Church loves to do—or we can open ourselves to where the Spirit wants to take us. The Church is alive only because the Spirit makes it so. So what if the massive changes that we're living through are birth pangs of something new being born by the Spirit, a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work in us, forming and reforming us for what's coming next?

The Spirit wants to move us into that future, but we often want to stay where we are or, worse, try to return to the so-called “glory days”—which weren't all that glorious. Instead, we have to move. I like to think of God as a verb, as being and becoming. The divine name given to Moses in Sinai, “I AM,” reflects this meaning (Exodus 3:14), being and becoming. But we have this bad habit—maybe the result of the Fall or the sinfulness of human nature—of turning verbs into nouns, into objects that are just there, static. My friend, James Hollis, a Jungian analyst (who spoke here at CPC a year ago last February before COVID), suggests that we would be better served by transforming some of our nouns back into verbs. It might make for “inelegant English,” but we would be better off. We need to think of the human self, for example, not as a noun, but as a verb: a self *selfing*. Our stories are *storying* us all the time. Nature is *naturing*, always, it's never static. We could say, then, that God is *Godding*. Hollis says, “Our ego, in service to understanding and the need for control converts the elemental processes in life into nouns. We foolishly convert even ‘the gods’ into nouns, into objects ‘up there,’ looking down, rather than metaphors” for something at work in us and through us.⁵ When we turn verbs into nouns we “fix” them and fixate on them, stop their movement or development or change or transformation, we grab hold of them and in order control them. We do the same with our images of God; we're often guilty of turning a verb into a noun, turning it into a static idol. “We turn the mystery into nouns and make them objects.”⁶

Perhaps this is why the Church has been reluctant to fully embrace the work of the Spirit, because the Spirit is pure verb: movement, action, blowing wherever she will, beyond our control—and that often leaves us bewildered and scared. It's there in the text. They were bewildered, amazed, astonished, and confused (Acts 2:7-8, 13). But there's no reason to be afraid—ever.

What if, fully acknowledging our fear, being honest about it, we gave ourselves over to this incredibly benevolent force? What then? What if we opened the sails of our spirits and allowed the Holy Spirit to move, to blow through our lives in new ways, moving us forward, carrying us wherever we need to go? Imagine that. What would it look like? What would the church look like? No one knows for us. What I do know is that it will take the form of Christ: his grace, his joy, his goodness, his suffering-love, taking on flesh in our lives in tangible, life-changing, transforming ways. It will be a church—a people, a beloved community—alive and always coming alive—never for the sake of itself, never for the sake of the church — but for the sake of the world! *Come, Holy Spirit! Come, Creator Spirit! Come!*



The [dancing bag scene](#) from *American Beauty* (DreamWorks Pictures, 1999).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHxi-HSgNPc>

¹ *American Beauty*, written by Alan Ball and directed by Sam Mendes (DreamWorks Pictures, 1999).

² For convenience, I am drawing heavily from Cornelis van der Kooi's beautiful description of this scene at the beginning of his Warfield Lectures given at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2014. See *This Incredibly Benevolent Force: The Holy Spirit in Reformed Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 1-2.

³ Van der Kooi, 2. This scene becomes an entrée into the focus of his lectures and later book, offering a new Reformed vision of the Holy Spirit, what he calls a Spirit-Christology.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), II.i.3.

⁵ James Hollis, *Hauntings: Dispelling the Ghosts Who Run Our Lives* (Asheville, NC: Chiron Publications, 2013), 1-2, 30. Hollis is making a psychological point here, however there are considerable theological implications here as well.

⁶ James Hollis in a talk given to the Jung Society of Washington, Embassy of Switzerland, Washington, DC, 7th June 2014.