

SERMON BY THE REV. BETSY JOHNS ROADMAN, 5/15/05 - PENTECOST
ST. AUGUSTINE'S CHURCH, CROTON-ON-HUDSON, NY
TEXTS: ACTS 2:1-11; JOHN 20:19-23

About a year ago, I began a three-month stint working with a coach. Not a personal trainer-type coach, or a voice coach, but a life coach. A life coach is different than a therapist, or a mentor, or a consultant. According to this particular coach's website, coaching is "...a relationship, a partnership of 'equals,' entirely focused on the growth, effectiveness, and fulfillment of the client."¹

In an initial conversation, my new coach and I talked about some areas of my life in which I would like to see change. I was given specific questions to think about, and we set up an appointment for several days later. At the beginning of that appointment, the coach posed a question that, at first, seemed redundant, given the conversations that we'd already had. He asked me, simply, "Do you want to change?"

Well, of course I wanted to change! Why else would I have done the assignment, and kept the appointment? But as I thought about it, I realized that the question was actually a very good one. I might be able to accurately identify areas of my life in which I see potential for growth. I might seek out the resources that would be of value to me in that process. I might even go through the motions of that coaching relationship. But if I'm not honestly ready to risk the unknown by taking specific steps to break out of possibly unproductive, but familiar and comfortable patterns of functioning, no change is going to happen. I have to be truly committed to things being different. I have to want change to take place.

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which we celebrate today, is God's gift to the church. And that gift is about empowerment; about facilitating change. God brought about a radical change in humanity's understanding of God, and of life itself, in the person of Jesus Christ. Our tradition teaches that the character and the ways of God have been fully and perfectly revealed to us through the life of Jesus of Nazareth; that in Jesus' death and resurrection, the power of death over humanity has been broken forever; that Jesus' resurrection shows us that absolutely nothing falls outside of the saving love of God; that God's arms hold and contain all things – even death itself. What we thought was set in stone isn't. Everything has changed. There is nothing to fear, and nothing to separate us from the love and presence of God – not even death.

The Holy Spirit is the presence of Jesus with us now, in a way that's just as real as his physical presence was to his original disciples. Now, as then, Jesus-with-us is about new life and about radical change - in our understanding of who God is and of what God is about, and of our understanding of our lives in relationship with God. The work of the Holy Spirit in our midst is about unconditional love, wholeness, healing, justice, and peace. It's about enabling ordinary people to live radical lives – lives that don't conform to the rules set by the powers and principalities of the world.

¹ www.heroncoaching.com

Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor has written, “When Jesus let go of his last breath – willingly, we believe, for love of us – that breath hovered in the air in front of him for a moment and then it was set loose on earth. It was such pungent breath – so full of passion, so full of life – that it did not simply dissipate as so many breaths do. It grew, in strength, in volume, until it was a mighty wind, which God sent spinning through an upper room in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. God wanted to make sure that Jesus’ friends were the inheritors of Jesus’ breath, and it worked ... Before the day was over, the church had grown from one hundred twenty to more than three thousand. Shy people had become bold, scared people had become gutsy, and lost people had found a sure sense of direction ... In short order, Jesus’ friends were doing things they had never seen anyone but him do, and there was no explanation for it, except that they had dared to inhale on the day of Pentecost. They had sucked in God’s own breath and they had been transformed by it.”²

The Holy Spirit is just as present, just as powerful, just as life-transforming right here and right now as it was when Jesus’ friends first experienced it on that momentous day of Pentecost. That means that each one of us individually and all of us together as the body of Christ – and, as with ripples in a pond – our closest relationships, and our work environments, and our nation, and even the world, can experience real and lasting transformation. But it means that each of us individually and all of us together as the body of Christ must let go of the ways of thinking, and reacting, and self-protecting that we tend to fall into. It means opening ourselves to believing that there is hope when we’ve been convinced that there is none. It means taking real risks in terms of our honesty in relationships, in terms of our generosity with resources that we’ve held closely as ours alone, in terms of our own carefully laid plans.

It’s not a perfect analogy, but it might help us to think of the Holy Spirit as our coach. The very real presence of Jesus is in ongoing relationship, or partnership, with us, entirely focused on our growth into the very likeness of God, and in and through that process, the transformation of the world. All that we need is available to us. But we must want the change that the Spirit brings. We need to want to become who God has created us to be – our unique selves, and this particular community of faith - filled with the spirit of Jesus.

Do we want to experience the change that the Holy Spirit brings? If not, we can most likely orchestrate a good enough life. We can continue patterns that give us some sense of control in a world that becomes more terrifying by the hour. We can proceed carefully and cautiously, not hoping too much for fear of being disappointed; not giving too much of ourselves for fear of being hurt; not relinquishing too much of our resources for fear of the possibility that there’s just not enough to go around. But if that’s what God had in mind for us, God wouldn’t have bothered to send the Holy Spirit. God doesn’t want us to settle for so much less than what God has made possible.

² *Home by Another Way*, p. 147.

Do we want to experience the change that the Holy Spirit brings? If so, let's take a deep breath, inviting the power of the Holy Spirit to begin to move things around, and turn things upside down, and challenge some of those assumptions on which we base many of our decisions and much of our behavior. Empowered by the spirit of Jesus, let's do what we've been afraid to do, and risk what we've been terrified to risk, and dare to hope that God will do, in and through us, all that God has claimed – that which we've hardly dared to believe. Amen.