

## *Of Swimming Lessons and Discipleship*

Day of Pentecost  
Pastor J. Stewart Hardy

Sunday, May 31, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b;  
Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A great and regular cause for celebration in my elementary school days was going swimming. I, however, was a reluctant participant, at least in the beginning. You see, my father, a Post Master, was moved from the country to a bustling, deep water seaport. In the country I played with the other kids in the river – no one bothered to teach us to swim. But in Port Chalmers, for obvious reasons, it was important to teach all the kids how to swim.

We didn't have a swimming pool at the elementary school in Port Chalmers, but we had two places where we walked for lessons. The most exciting place was the dry dock, which was available whenever ships were not being repaired. Then there was the Back Beach, a mile's walk from the school. I can still remember my first swimming lesson at the Back Beach where, with some reluctance, I was introduced to floating as a preparation for learning to swim.

It was for me, a bizarre experience. Oh, I was used to being in the water. Being in the water was fun. But I liked to have my feet firmly on the bottom. And floating at the Back Beach called for no feet whatsoever!

My teacher told me I had everything I needed to float. The water, he said, would hold me up! I was not convinced.

Could it be that all this talk of the Holy Spirit is something like that for most of us? Today we celebrate Pentecost and we hear the dramatic account in Acts of the gift of the Holy Spirit. But seriously, isn't it all just a bit over the edge, just a bit too much?

In reality for the people in Jesus' time, Pentecost was the name given by Greek followers of Judaism to the Festival celebrated 50 days after the offering of a sheaf of barley at Passover, symbolizing the first fruits of the harvest. Later as it developed, it was given further identity as the celebration of the giving of the Torah, giving the Law.

Then that development took a step further when the writer of Acts presented his account of the events that occurred for the Christians on the day of Pentecost, when the disciples received the gift of the Holy Spirit. There was, according to the writer of Acts, some confusion among those who were there to witness the event. Some who heard the voices of the disciples were convinced that they were just plain drunk, mumbling and babbling incoherently. But there were others who were astonished to hear the disciples speaking impeccably in their own native tongue.

What are we to make of that? Perhaps it's to be misled if we pay attention to the details which might cause us to miss the message. And the message is clear; it's the message, you see, that's far

more important than the details that carry it. It's simply this: that the baptized, you and I, the priesthood of believers, all of us down through the ages, are fully equipped, empowered, and enabled to tell the good news and to live Christ-like lives; to share with others what our faith means for us; and to proclaim God's unconditional love to all people. And we can do this because we have received the Holy Spirit, whether we are aware of it, or not.

You see, bearing the Holy Spirit is a lot like learning to float. Now I admit, some of us are better floaters than others (and I won't make comments on the tissue that makes us more buoyant). Some of us float right on the surface, and others of us tend to be a little bit below that, but believe it or not, we are all buoyant in water and we are all able to float. The fear is that when we take our feet off the bottom and lean back into the water, we will sink like a stone straight to the bottom. But you know what? We won't.

Getting to the bottom, if that's what you want, is hard work – try it sometime – and the deeper you go, the harder it gets. It wasn't till my teacher convinced me to lie back with his hands supporting me that I was able to risk lifting my feet off the bottom and slowly relaxing in the water. Then wonder of wonders, miracle of miracles, when he slowly removed his hands – there I was, floating on my back! I could float, it was a long way from swimming, but I could float nonetheless. Learning to employ my newly discovered gift for floating brought me to swimming lessons and learning various strokes, which quickly followed.

Jesus, too, was aware that the disciples would need encouragement and help and support if they were to take on and cope in the ministry and mission to which they were called, and yet be without His physical presence. In this morning's gospel we overhear Him telling the disciples that after His departure, help will be swift in coming. What He promises them and those who follow Him right down to us today, is the gift of the Holy Spirit. And as do all the gifts of life, the gift of the Holy Spirit comes to us solely by God's grace. We don't work for it; we don't earn it; it's simply given to all of us. It is freely bestowed upon us in baptism whether we are aware of it or not, whether we use it or not. This morning's gospel calls that Holy Spirit the "Advocate," the one who comes in place of Jesus to empower and enable the disciples in their mission, in their ministry, and in their witness. The gift is crucial for the church and for us since in truth, the real truth beloved, we always remain fragile; we often feel inadequate; and we constantly need support.

The church, the community of the faithful, our congregation and its mission and ministry, is first and foremost, a servant body, constantly seeking to discern and live and speak according to the prompting and leading of the Holy Spirit. So it is that we act, and decide, and live in a vastly different way than the way the world does it. Our Church-wide assemblies, our Synod assemblies, our congregation council meetings will lose their way entirely when they act solely like secular legislative bodies. Those who attend these meetings are not bound by party affiliation, nor in the synodical or national meetings do they function as representatives of any congregation, but each voting member of these bodies is called to discern where the Spirit is leading and to vote accordingly. And the bodies will act, not on the leadership of an individual, but on the bodies' discernment of the leading of the Spirit. That is why we *call* pastors and rostered staff by a call process, again discerning what God is up to in our midst – have you bothered to ask him that in your prayers? Now that Stu is going to retire, what are you up to? Let us in on it. Help us understand what you're doing with us. And then give us the courage and confidence to follow the prompting and the leading of the Spirit.

How alien this is to the hiring processes used by business or government or industry. But there is more. The world, secular society, has its own definitions of sin, justice, and judgment. It constantly rewards those who measure up to its standards and norms and punishes those who transgress them. How different from the community of faith with compassion, understanding, forgiveness, and always the possibility of a new beginning. And for the individual, the time to recover from erroneous ways, to repent of an action taken, and to grow into new life.

Just so Jesus defies the reigning structures of his time and ends up as one of those punished. The destiny of His loyal followers, He warns, may be no different. Rather, the gospel declares that the Spirit will expose the world's way of doing things. The Spirit will pull back the curtains of the world's unbelief and deceit and show its leadership to be no longer powerful, but condemned.

Exactly how this is to be accomplished is not specified in the Gospel, but apparently has to do with the way the church carries out its mission and ministry in the world.

Finally the gospel reminds us that the Spirit is not only directed towards the immediate lifetime disciples of Jesus, but to all those who follow, even though they be far removed in time. Unlike the original disciples, we don't have personal recollections of Jesus, His conversations and the incidents that occurred in His lifetime, but we are part of a long and developing tradition. You and I, beloved, are keepers of the story and ours is the task to pass it on. Even though our understandings change, even though God continues to reveal Himself to us in new and surprising ways, we are part of a living chain of witness from the time of Christ right down to the present day, changed and ever changing, reformed and ever reforming. In a living, dynamic history, and not in a straightjacket attempting to live in the past. It is into this great tradition, into the current mission and ministry of this congregation, that this morning we are welcoming new members. We are not left with the presumption of the Spirit alone, opening wide doors, ecstasies and visions, and all sorts of unverifiable claims by inspired teachers or leaders. We live in a community that as a community of faith seeks to discern the direction and prompting of the Spirit. Neither are we just left with reports from faithful disciples of the past, but we have the gospel, we have the Spirit, and we have the tradition in and out of which we discern how to live and act and change. We are not guaranteed infallibility, nor are we told that we have the keys to unlock all the mysteries of God. But we have the gift of the Spirit which calls us, gathers us, enlightens us, and sanctifies us as God's people commissioned and equipped to play our part in His plan of salvation. And surely, surely that is something to celebrate.

Just so when I began my first career as an elementary school teacher, it was my turn to teach my class how to float and how to swim. By then, however, the schools had indoor pools. No more treks to the beach or the dry dock, just a short walk from the classroom to the pool with all the luxuries – just think of it – changing rooms and showers, and warm water in which to float and swim.

And there, and at last, it was my turn to support and teach the children to float and later, as they trusted their good friend, to teach them how to swim. Amen.

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