

Ms. Nurya Love Parish
May 23, 2010
The Day of Pentecost

Holy God, help me to preach in a way that gives honor to you and not to myself. Allow me the grace to bring your word to this people, in this place, at this time—so that we may know you in this people, in this place, at this time. Keep me mindful of the family of Christ across all times and all places—including those who have suffered and died for the sake of your gospel, and let me be faithful to the truth and the way and the life which is Jesus.

On Pentecost of 1996 I was baptized, and my life has never been the same.

I was twenty-five years old and in my last semester of seminary training to become a pastor in the Unitarian Universalist Association. For my baptismal preparation I had gone to King's Chapel. It had been founded as an Episcopal church, then turned Unitarian in the 1800's. There I met with Rev. Carl Scovel, who was at the time the unofficial bishop of the Christian Unitarians. Every Lent he ran a class for baptismal preparation for whomever wanted to come. I came because I really wanted to prepare for baptism with other people. I was scared. As I told him when we first spoke, "I think this might be dangerous."

Being baptized as a Christian in the Unitarian Universalist Association was a bad career move.

There were about ten Christian churches in the UUA, which is generally a home for intellectual and spiritual seekers. Now that I was a Christian, I really did not feel called to serve a congregation which celebrated the holidays of all the world's religions—which most UU congregations were starting to do. So despite the fact that at this point I had been president of both my seminary's group and the national body of UU seminarians, being baptized rendered me essentially unmarketable. It was truly the abundant mercy of a provident God that a group of UU Christians in Michigan decided they felt called to start a new congregation at this time. Had this group of brave souls not determined to found Epiphany Community Church in Fenton, Michigan, I would have been twenty-five, baptized out of a job market I had spent four years preparing to enter, disqualified to do the only thing I was qualified to do.

So because of my baptism, I moved to Michigan. Because of my baptism, I spent four years in Christian ministry among the Unitarian Universalists. Because of my baptism, I felt increasingly uneasy serving in a denomination that was not clearly Christian. Because of my baptism, I thought perhaps a

nondenominational church would be a better fit. Because of my baptism, I snuck over to services at St Mark's and St. Andrew's while I was serving Fountain Street Church as associate minister, because I needed food for my soul. Because of my baptism, I gradually recognized that my call was to serve among other people who loved Jesus too. Because of my baptism, I resigned my position at Fountain Street Church and my fellowship in the Unitarian Universalist Association, with no guarantee that I would ever serve in ordained ministry again, even though I loved it and felt called to it. It turned out I was right: it is dangerous to be baptized. Being baptized as a follower of Jesus can turn your life upside down.

There is one big reason that being baptized is dangerous, and the baptismal liturgy that we use in the Episcopal Church names this reason beautifully. The words are these: "You are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever." In baptism, you are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. As we saw in the reading from Acts, the Holy Spirit is traditionally imaged as fire. Fire is dangerous. It can burn down all your assumptions about who you are and what your life is meant to accomplish. But fire doesn't just destroy. It also purifies, transforms, and energizes.

Sara Miles is a great example of someone whose life shows the fire of the Holy Spirit. An adult convert to Christianity, she started a food pantry at her church, St Gregory of Nyssa, that now serves over 1200 families each week. I know we've all heard of food pantries in churches before. What makes this one different is that food distribution takes place in the sanctuary, including the same table at which Holy Eucharist is consecrated and provided to the worshipping congregation. What they do in the food pantry and what they do on Sunday morning are the same thing: Christ feeds the multitudes with his body and blood: with bread and wine at Sunday Eucharist, with potatoes and cabbage at Friday food distribution. St Gregory of Nyssa also pioneers some of the Episcopal church's most creative liturgy, melding ancient and new ways of praising God with song and dance every Sunday.

Many churches have invited Sara and other folks from St Gregory to come and speak to them about how they might also create food pantries and experimental liturgies where they are. But, as she writes in her recent book, *Jesus Freak*, the people who invite her always seem so uncertain, so tentative about what's possible for them. She writes, "Of course, they'd say, you can experiment as much as you like out there in California, we could never get away with that in the South. Of course you must have a lot of creative folks in your congregation... Of course you have a wonderful bishop, a lot of money, a better class of poor people, some mysterious kind of permission that allows you to be so cool and daring." In response, she reflects,

“I wanted to cry. “What more permission do they need?” I asked Paul (her rector) back in our hotel one evening. “‘Receive the Holy Spirit’ isn’t enough?”

Receive the Holy Spirit. That’s what Pentecost is about. Pentecost comes around every year to whack us upside the head again with a reminder of just what we are here for: to really be alive on our days on earth, to allow ourselves to catch fire, to remember that we are here to serve God—GOD!-- not a paycheck or another person or our own pride.

As the apostle Paul writes, “We are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” Now, that’s dangerous. Because to suffer with Christ means being willing to experience our own Good Fridays, when it seems all is lost. It means being willing to share the pain of another, when Good Friday comes around for them. And because I have to imagine that being raised from the dead is as strange as dying, it also means being willing to embrace that sweet suffering that is Eastertide, the curious life that is life beyond death, when something new is beginning and there is no way to know where it will lead.

In the words of Annie Dillard, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."

Because John’s gospel reminds us that Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in him; and the letter to the Romans reminds us that we are adopted as children of God, members of the body of Christ. And we know that God is the creator of our entire world, every minim mote. And yet somehow we come here week by week and worship without being blown to pieces by the sheer majesty and wonder of it all. Yes, it’s dangerous.

But the danger of the Holy Spirit life is the danger we were born for. We were made for this. We were made to be named and loved and blessed and broken and given. And so there is something in us that is unsatisfied until we embrace the dangerous life along with Jesus—for only through the dangerous way of life in Christ can true safety be found. In dying to self we are born to eternal life. That’s why we get baptized. That’s why we come back, week after week, for Christ’s body and blood. That’s why we

celebrate Pentecost. Because only by embracing the danger of life in Christ can we find the safety of peace in him.

I want to end with another quote from Sara Miles' book, a quote which for me sums up what it means to receive the Holy Spirit, to be one with Jesus even as he and the Father are one. She writes,

Ordinary people still hope, suspect, and believe they can be Jesus. The formulas of religion may be so overfamiliar that many believers have a hard time acting as if this most surprising narrative is true. They may doubt themselves, and not understand why Jesus trusts us to do his work. They may be sick to death of the institution, tired of propping up a dysfunctional church, and trying to coast by without caring too much. They may, like me, be anxious because there's no way to be Jesus on your own private terms; you have to jump in and do alongside his other followers.

But Jesus is real and so, praise God, are we. Every single thing the resurrected Jesus does is through our bodies. You're fed, you're healed, you're forgiven, you're pronounced clean. You are loved, and you're raised from the dead. Go and do likewise.

Amen.

Miles, Sara. *Jesus Freak: Feeding, Healing, Raising the Dead*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.