



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

The Feast Of God The Disturber
A sermon preached by the Rev. Abel Lopez
May 31, 2009

In the name of the loving, liberating and life-giving God. Amen

Good morning. A few weeks ago, my colleagues gathered to match our calendars with the preaching schedule and learned that our Rector Ed Bacon was going to be in a silent retreat today. I was so excited, not because Ed was going to be away and quiet, but because I always dreamed of preaching on Pentecost and on the very special day when we come together as a community of faith for the baptism of Abby, Rana, William, Andrew, Amelia, Nora, Gemma, Weston, Jade, Savannah and Ford.

James Walker, our Director of Music, had this terrific idea to join our talented musicians from our bilingual service with this amazing choir of heavenly voices and thus to make our worship experience this Sunday morning even more uplifting, and even more filled with God's spirit and gifts on this special occasion. I have a personal invocation for this kind of worship service. It goes like this: *'Get right church and let's go home!'*

For me 'get right church' is always about bringing to our Sunday worship experience all of who we are and wish to become, all our joys and celebrations, our burdens and sorrows, our dreams and hopes, all of our fears and struggles, the familiar, the unknown, and the doubts. It is about being able to experience here as a gathered community, a spiritual transformation, a kind of a soul-food that will nurture and strengthen each of us for the work we are to do in the coming week, the work of our jobs and the work of our creator, "the transformation of the world."

How appropriate on Pentecost, the day we celebrate the "birthday of the church," for us to speak of both individual and corporate spiritual transformation, of transforming our institutions, our communities, our states, our country and even the world.

In the story of Pentecost, we are told how the Holy Spirit descended on all who were together in one place and how people from a variety of backgrounds, languages, and ethnicities came together and understood what was being said in their own language and how they overcame the barriers of culture and language, and gave witness to God.

For as the Holy Spirit descended upon them, *Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of them. (Acts 2:3)* It was a true multicultural event, the epitome of inclusion as can only be designed and executed by Allah, the energy and

presence of God, as diverse languages, differing skin tones, cultures, and most likely variation in intelligence. It was a salad bowl.

It is from this divine diversity that we get the bright lights and colors of our Pentecost service, the reds and oranges of the flame. Fire is indeed a common image of theophany. In this verse we hear echoes of the promise of John the Baptist as he announces one coming after him who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Luke 3:16,17)¹

In many Christian traditions, a peaceful dove landing on Jesus at his baptism represents the Holy Spirit. The concept of the Spirit as this active, vibrant and energized presence of Christ can be difficult for some to take, especially among Episcopalians. Some of us simply like a soother, gentle and controlled experience. My professor of Pastoral Care at the seminary in Austin used to say: that the Episcopal Church was so well-ordered that it would continue to function for a full month after the Second Coming of Christ!

And yet if today's reading teaches us anything, it is that the Holy Spirit cannot be controlled. It is indeed the story of how unsettling the in-breaking of the Spirit is, of how 'God the disturber' breathes new possibilities into our lives when our religious coziness and complacencies with the status quo get in the way of our own growth and ability to be faithful to God's calling in our own time. I knew I was on the right track when our newsletter reached you and I received several phone calls inquiring about the nature of my sermon title. I was happy to know that I was not the only disturbed person, but that the title disturbed many of you as well and I was happy to think that that would increase church attendance today.

This day is an important day in the life of the church. It is the day when God tells us that God is not just the God of one group of people. God is the God of all creation. The Good News of God in Christ is to be shared freely and openly. The love of God is not to be spoken of in quiet rooms by a cloistered group of believers, but shared openly with everyone.² The love of God is not a utopian idea or abstract concept, but rather, the highest human aspiration that calls out our sense of humanity as a society and our individual consciousness which propels us to translate and make this love tangible for every human being. All races, all genders, all sexual orientations, all conditions of humanity are to hear and fully partake in this radical inclusive love of God.

But, no matter how wonderful this invitation sounds to our ears, this love is not a core component or a critical ingredient from which the world operates, including the church. It is not a surprise that still many individuals, institutions and governments will do anything to shatter this God given right to some persons, and which, by the way, creates the conditions for God the disturber to intervene.

I had a first hand experience with God the disturber that began with my hearing the decision of the California Supreme Court to uphold Proposition 8, banning marriage between same sex couples last Tuesday. While I, like many of you, expected that the courts might rule the way they did, I was simply not prepared for the profound sadness and anger I felt. I kept

¹ Judy Yates Siker. *The Unsettling Holy Spirit*. The Living Pulpit. April-June 2004.

² The Rev. William D. Oldland. *The Day of Pentecost- Whitsunday*. June 4, 2006.

thinking of how far we've come as a nation in addressing civil rights issues since the 60's. We have an African-American as President; we have a female as Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, we're on the verge of appointing the first Hispanic individual to the highest court in the nation. Such progress, and yet as I thought of the California Supreme Court's decision, I couldn't help but think of Dr. King's words, *-that one day he wanted his four children to live in a nation where they would not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.*³

I thought of how for my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, they must so much desire to live in a nation where they are not judge by who God calls them to love, but by the content of their character and the integrity and fidelity of their relationships.

Dr. King said once, and I quote, *"Discrimination is a hell-hound that gnaws at Negroes in every waking moment of their lives to remind them that the lie of inferiority is accepted as truth in the society dominating them."*⁴ Let me be clear, to deny the love of gay and lesbian persons, to say that their love is somehow different, less revered by God, to say that it somehow diminishes the love between a man and a woman, says that every gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender person is seen as being less than, not as whole, not as good as their heterosexual brothers and sisters. It is discrimination of the lowest order and it gnaws, it gnaws at each and every gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender person every waking moment of their lives reminding them that this lie that they are damaged, that they are different, that they are living in sin, is accepted as truth in the society dominating them.

God the disturber weighs heavily upon my heart as he has since last Tuesday and I hope, I pray that she is weighing upon the heart of every person in California committed to justice. Let's not shy away from the fact that the abolishment of Proposition 8 and the discrimination that it spreads like a net is a civil right issue.

Included in the 1400 or so benefits a same-gender couple are denied when they make a life commitment to each other are joint property ownership, tax breaks, legal decisions in end-of-life, health care, shared medical benefits and insurance, the ability to take a leave of absence when a loved one is ill, social security benefits, the list goes on and on. Some of the most heartbreaking stories of injustice come from same-gender couples who have shared their lives together, yet are not seen as partners in the eyes of the law.⁵

Let us be reminded that Dr. King also said, *"... he who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it. So in order to be true to one's conscience and true to God, a righteous person has no alternative but to refuse to cooperate with an evil system."*⁶

I am not a man who uses the word evil very often. But the discriminatory actions of the state in refusing to acknowledge the commitment and love of same-gender couples are the center of an evil system. A system that does not allow lifelong partners to be at their loved ones' bedsides when they die, a system that deprives people of the custody of their

³ "I have a Dream," Speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963

⁴ From a speech given to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Aug. 16, 1967

⁵ From Don Southworth' sermon *By The Power Vested In Me, I Now Pronounce...*NWUUC, September 28, 2003. Soulforce.

⁶ *Stride Toward Freedom*, New York: Harper & Row, 1958

children, ownership of their homes, and the same basic equal rights that I have as a heterosexual, is evil.⁷

For some time now, in the spirit of God the Disturber, I have been bothered by my participation in this injustice. Thus, I have decided that when I sign a state sponsored marriage license for a mixed gender couple, I am simply re-affirming state-sanctioned discrimination against same-gender couples who are emphatically denied the privilege to make their unions legal.” I choose not to participate in this discrimination. Going forward I, as a priest, commit myself to performing sacramental blessings, the religious ritual of marriage for mix gender couples as well as same gender couples, but not to perform the civil ritual of marriage, the signing of a marriage license. I will not do so until I am able to do so for mix and same gender couples equally. I am hoping the Bishop, our Rector, staff, vestry and congregation will support me in this decision.

So today, I declare Pentecost Sunday, “The Feast of God the Disturber.” We are visited by a wonderful spirit, full of energy, full of diversity, all in the presence of God the creator. Earlier in this service we sang Holy Spirit come; come in the name of Jesus. Espíritu Santo, ven, ven, en el nombre de Jesús. I pray that the Holy Spirit will come today, in the coming weeks and months ahead, come as the Great Disturber. I pray that the children about to be baptized will be wash in a life long spirit of embracing the great diversity of this planet and that each of us as we renew our baptismal covenants today will find comfort in the disturbing presence of God which calls us to stand up for justice and righteousness and against discrimination for the least of these.

Amen.

⁷ *Ibid.*(3)