

# Kate Cudlipp: Not on Our Own

Sermon by Kate Cudlipp

June 8, 2003 (Pentecost)

## Not on Our Own

The reflection paragraph in our new Pentecost liturgy speaks of fear-fear before we act and fear afterward. Often in our community prayers, someone confesses that she or he acts more out of fear than love. At times, I have wished that fear could be banished from my life, because I feel that so many of my decisions are colored, at least in part, by fear...

I have struggled with passages throughout the Bible that exhort humans to "fear" God. That has sounded coercive and at odds with other passages that speak of God's love for humanity-and all creation.

When I look more closely at the role fear plays in our lives, however, I have to concede that fear is not necessarily bad. In fact, I would say it is an integral part of our humanity. Fear wakes us up. Fear's cousin, anxiety, tips us off to important issues in our lives that we might otherwise ignore. Fear is a way God gets our attention, but fear is not the end of the Christian story.

Think of all the scriptural stories of individuals being confronted by God or God's messengers-usually angels. The passages often begin with the words, "Fear not," or "Be not afraid." Of course, humans are afraid when confronted by the Holy One because that One is always calling us to an undertaking we see only dimly, but we know that if we say "yes," our lives will be changed in ways we cannot discern. Look at Moses, the prophets, and Mary and note: Fear does not have the last word!

Speaking of fear, our theme for Pentecost is “Where Do We Go from Here?” There is a simple answer to that question: we are going to 276 Carroll Street, NW, but then there are all the unanswered questions:

- Who will make the move with us?
- Will we lose the regular company of people we love?
- Will new folks come toward us? Will kids be part of our new mix?
- What will it take to manage our building and will that drain energy and funds from our other priorities?
- Will we find new life, new energy, and new ministries and missions?

These real questions generate real fear and anxiety. The fear is of losing something precious. What if Seekers Church does not survive this move? What if it changes so much that I can no longer find a home here? Some of us are more practiced than others of us at leaving one home and finding a new one, but for all of us who have committed to this expression of the Body of Christ, there is the threat of loss.

Does this fear point us toward an important truth beyond the immediately obvious loss? I believe it does. It points toward the question: Are we being the people, the church, God calls us to be?-because if we are not, we have already lost our collective reason for being. Moreover, if we are not to lose our very reason for being, we must keep this question-about who and **whose** we are-foremost in all that we do.

Left to our own devices, we will not be able to keep this question foremost. We will be stuck in the human fears of change, loss and death. The good news in the scriptures for this Pentecost morning is that we are **not** left to our own devices.

The passage from the Gospel of John tells us that God, through Christ, has sent the Paraclete to be with us. “Paraclete” in

Greek means "called to the side of" and has been translated as "advocate," "counselor," "comforter," "encourager."

In the Letter to the Romans, Paul says that this Advocate will intercede for us before God and will help us know and pray for what we **really** need.

The Psalmist says to God, "When you send forth your spirit, new life begins and you renew the face of the earth." (Ps. 104: 30)

Finally, in the alternative reading from Ezekiel, the prophet invites the spirit to "come from the four winds and breathe upon these slain, that they may live and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude." (Ezek. 37: 9-10)

Imagine! We are never all alone, needing to fend for ourselves. Always with us is One who knows our deepest needs and stands ready to advocate for us and with us! Now this may not always feel like good news. What I, in my ego self, may believe I want and need is not necessarily what is truly life giving for me, and what will give me real life may seem impossibly hard.

How many of us have had the experience of knowing we need to choose a certain path but dread it because we know it means change, struggle, risk and possible failure in the eyes of others? Yet once something has pushed us down that path, we know this is where we need to be. Without the "something" pushing, we would have stayed where we were, apparently safe and comfortable but dying in our spirits.

Christians know that "something" as the Holy Spirit-the Paraclete, God's breath, Christ's presence. That "something" acts through many channels: inner promptings, dreams, human companions, worldly necessity, encounters with nature, ecstatic revelation-and more.

(Of course, not all inner promptings, dreams, etc. are from

the Holy Spirit, and that is why Paul, in First Corinthians, speaks of one important gift in community as the ability to discern spirits. We spend our lives as Christians discerning which proddings and calls are from God and which are from another, death-dealing source, and we believe this work can only be done in the context of community.)

It is not only as individuals that we are addressed by the Holy Spirit but as a community—a congregation, a church. Some in Seekers speak of the “angel” of Seekers Church, meaning, in part, the unique call this church has to witness to and model the good news of Christ to the world. The Holy Spirit stand with **us**, as Seekers Church, intercedes for **us**, and helps **us** claim our unique mission and ministry in the world.

We know something about who we are, what our mission is. We say in our call:

*Our call is to be a “Seekers community” which comes together in weekly worship rooted in the Biblical faith, with shared leadership; and disperses with a common commitment to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives.*

We can look around and see this call being lived out in many ways in our midst. I invite you to look at your brothers and sisters in this space this morning and give thanks for the work of the Spirit in the lives of those you see. Do not forget to include yourself! The Spirit is at work; we have only to pray for the eyes to see and the ears to hear the work that God is already doing among us.

We can also see certain steps ahead of us as we contemplate our move to Takoma. Our Building Development Team is doing a wonderful job of anticipating what will serve us well in the design and details of our space and building them into the renovation.

Living Water mission group has been born, in part to bring new life into our new space.

The Servant Leadership Team is working with the nitty-gritty questions around how to make our space available to Seekers and non-Seekers. Moreover, we are all, as responsible stewards of a valuable resource, challenged to think about who and how to manage our building.

We see some things and yet much is not visible to us. Our Pentecost scriptures speak to this condition. In the Letter to Romans, Paul says, "In hope we were saved. But hope is not hope if its object is seen; why does one hope for what one sees? And hoping for what we cannot see means awaiting it with patient endurance." (Rom 8: 24)

The Christian faith is about taking steps and making choices in the present with a real but limited understanding of that towards which we, along with all creation, are moving. We believe in the power of the Holy Spirit, as the Gospel of John puts it, to guide us into all truth. (Personally, I believe that "us" means the ultimate "us"-all of creation-and that this culmination will probably not come in my lifetime.)

Therefore, we, imperfect humans that we are, respond imperfectly to God's dream for us, knowing that the Holy Spirit is present to encourage, comfort, guide, and challenge us as we forgive each other and ourselves for our mistakes and strive to live more fully as Christ calls us.

We undertake our move to Carroll Street and all that symbolizes about our future with fear. However we know this step is the one to which we are called, and without knowing just where the following steps will take us, we know that we move ahead relying not only on our human capacities but also on the guiding and sustaining capacity of the Holy Spirit.

There is one more aspect of the Holy Spirit in today's lessons that we need to notice as we move closer to our changed life

in a new home: The familiar passage in Acts where the Holy Spirit comes with unmistakable authority to empower Jesus' followers to launch a new ministry of truth in the world.

With the arrival of the Holy Spirit, Peter and the other apostles had to preach the good news. They were filled with the understanding of something so important that they had to share it. First, they shared among themselves, the ones who had seen the risen Christ and were waiting for the fulfillment of his promise to them. They all began to speak, but the good news could not be contained in so small a group. It could not wait for marketing campaigns to be devised or communications strategies to be designed. It simply broke forth, transcending the barriers of language and nationality.

People who did not know they were awaiting good news were touched-devout Jews who were already grounded in their faith. We can probably assume that the excitement, the authenticity of the message also reached those who were not so devout. "That day about three thousand persons were added." (Acts 2:41)

This is our Christian heritage and faith. I do not mean to suggest that our small band, gathered at Carroll Street, will testify as the apostles did and add three thousand persons to our number.

I do believe that we can trust-and must trust-that the Holy Spirit will help us speak our particular piece of the Good News so that others can hear it. Moreover, as those others-latter day Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Phrygians, Judeans, Egyptians and Romans, who for us are the young and the old, the black and white, the native English-speakers and others-hear the good news through us, we will be changed in ways we can't foresee-and that is good news, however threatening it might seem in the anticipation.

I want to end by inviting each of you to consider what you

would say about your faith, your hope, and the good news manifested to you through this particular expression of the Body of Christ, this Seekers Church. I believe we need to practice this awareness, practice this articulation, if we are to allow the Holy Spirit to “work in us to create the desire to do God’s will.” (Phil. 2: 12)

Who knows what power we might experience as we dare to speak boldly about what we know, even if we know it only imperfectly? To do this is to allow the Holy Spirit to use our doubts and fears as springboards to God’s hopes for us-as individuals and as a small part of the Body of Christ.