

Marjory Zoet Bankson: First Fruits of Pentecost

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

By Marjory Zoet Bankson

First Fruits of Pentecost

Gospel Lesson:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? (Acts 2: 1-xx)

By now, you've looked for your picture on the bulletin covers and made up your own story connecting the "First Fruits" theme for season and today, which is Pentecost Sunday, so I won't interrupt your imagination too much with the story I made up to link these lovely images:

- the children we once were, gathered here like a cloud of witnesses and held in our hands;
- the text with its rushing wind and tongues of fire, thick accents of Galilean speech and the miracle of

strangers in Jerusalem, drawn together by hearing about Jesus in their own language;

- and the third image—whatever associations you have with Pentecost.

Pentecost was a time of celebration for the Jews. It was the Feast of Weeks, seven weeks and one day after Passover, sort of a mini-Jubilee, celebrating the first grain harvest after the lean months of winter, a time to bring your "first fruits" to the Temple and thank God for another season of survival. It was a time to "blow off steam" when you know there's going to be food enough, a time to leave the land and party with your friends.

We who worry about eating too much and getting too fat may have a hard time feeling the joy of Pentecost for the Jews who came to Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks after Passover. We haven't experienced the terror of having to stretch the last of our food through the growing season, until the first grain was harvested. We haven't had to choose, when the cupboard was bare, to eat the seed corn carefully saved for spring planting; but we have all seen the haunted look of Ethiopian or Rwandan refugees who had to eat their seed grain to survive and did not get any "first fruits" from their ravaged land.

But some of us know the fear of looking for a job without success or lean times of waiting seven weeks for a promised paycheck or not getting dental care that you need because you don't have the money. Most of us have those times of terror to draw on when we read this story and think about what it means to bring a "thank offering" to the altar.

Pentecost was not the full granary at the end of the harvest, but the sharing of "first fruits" – tender shoots – green wheat – early lettuce – spring onions – first strawberries. It was the season of promise. It was good things to eat and more to come. Relief from a season of waiting and "not yet."

The story of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz was the story told and retold during the Feast of Weeks. Ruth was a foreigner, a widow, scavenging to feed herself and her mother-in-law, Naomi.

Boaz was a distant relative of Naomi's but not the one who was heir to Naomi's husband's property and therefore the rightful owner of the two women. First, Boaz noticed Ruth and gave her protection, ordered his men not to molest her. Then, when she came to him on the threshing floor, he touchingly asked why she had not sought out a younger man. The story of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz ended joyfully with their "First Fruits," – their child Obed, father of Jesse, who was father of King David. This story brought together young and old, male and female, Jew and Gentile – what the Prophet Joel predicted would happen when the Spirit was poured out.

When people came to Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks, the story of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz was wrapped up in remembering the "good old days" when David united the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, when they were an independent nation. Pentecost was a time to bring your "First Fruits" to the Temple in Jerusalem, to meet your friends, to eat and drink and tell harvest stories. No wonder some people thought the "giddy Galileans" were drunk with wine, even if it was just 9 in the morning.

Whenever I hear this text from Acts about the sight and sound of the Holy Spirit's outpouring, I think of firing a pottery kiln at night. That's the best time to fire because the cool air helps the kiln to draw well. With the gas burners on full, it's like the sound of a propane torch, magnified many times. Flames lick the night air from every orifice, reaching for oxygen, hungry for change. If you look inside, the bright yellow-white light is pulsing and the pots stand almost transparent—shadows in the vibrant light. The stony structure of the clay is being transformed before your very eyes. Like the great fireball that gave birth to the universe.

Cosmologist Brian Swimme speaks about "quantum fluctuation" – the phenomenon which happens everywhere in the universe, as elemental particles fluctuate in and out of existence. Pentecost feels that way to me. It feels like cellular change. A spiritual comet comes in on a congregation in the middle of their "First Fruits" celebration. No wonder people were amazed!

Something stunning happened there that day. Frightened fishermen turned into powerful preachers. The egg of incubation cracked wide open and power ran out! Their relationship with Jesus split apart and spilled out on young and old, male and female, slave and free. Everyone! They became "First Fruits" of the Spirit! It was not a reward for being good, or even a result of belief. We don't actually know who got it and who didn't. Clearly some onlookers didn't, because they were there to mock and criticize. But something happened and suddenly people who had been strangers were amazed because the Holy Spirit broke through traditional barriers and made them One. Fire and speech made them so. They became a single body instead of a collection of different nationalities. It was the birth of the church, the living body of the Christ Spirit.

And what does this have to do with us? Sitting here expectantly this morning, holding the children we once were in our hands? What does this story of Pentecost have to do with us?

Last Tuesday night, in the money class, I saw it – and heard it – and felt it. Not roaring like a kiln burning at night, but more like a match flare, bright and small. The week before, we had done an exercise, gathered data about our net monthly income, total assets and giving rate.

We discovered that most of the 15 people in the class have a similar net income...about \$2,000/month. On the surface, we were a very homogeneous group of middle-class Americans.

But when we listed our assets, money in the bank or somewhere else, and house equity and so forth, we discovered a wide variety, from \$1.5 million to minus \$30,000, like grain in the barn. Some of us had a lot and some of us had none. Worse, some of us were carrying debts that seem staggering, given the salary level and living costs today. We also looked at our giving patterns and discovered, to nobody's surprise, that giving was related to those assets and not to our current income. Giving ranged from 20% of monthly income to less than 1% for people who didn't have a "nest egg" to fall back on if they lost their jobs.

In smaller groups, we told stories of asking for help and I began to feel the Spirit move among us as people shared the truth about themselves in relationship to money. We spoke about how hard it is for us to share our "first fruits" if we're not sure about the size of the harvest, especially when we have children to educate in special ways or healthcare to plan for. We talked about forbidden things – like how much easier it is for us to gather \$3,000 to help Joyce Freeman meet her tax bill than it would be to do the same for Carolyn or Hollis or even the Dyers.

We talked about how hard it is to ask for help, not for somebody else (we're pretty good at that) but for ourselves. We expect each other to be independent, assertive, self-sustaining. And caring. We depend on that but don't want to draw on it too much, for fear we'll become a bother, an outsider.

But then our talk turned to the Growing Edge Fund and something began to happen. I saw the flame flare up when Lewise told the story of how, after years at home caring for a child with lots of health problems, she thought about going back to work with her Ph.D. in Psychology. How she asked for \$300 to "bone up" for the licensing exam. And what it meant to receive that vote of confidence from the Growing Edge Fund.

Then Peter jumped up and went into the office, where he got this book off the shelf. Mary Carol brought it last Sunday, ready to give an extra copy to someone else. It is Mary Claire Powell's book about her mother, Ruth Powell, called "The Widow." It was the first Growing Edge Fund grant in this community, to encourage Mary Claire with her writing and photography. And the Spirit flared again. The copyright date is 1981.

Then somebody else told about her excitement several Sundays ago, when the seven young people who came here from South Africa sang during the offering – how glad she was that we had helped Roy go to South Africa that first time from the Growing Edge Fund – and we all felt the warmth of the flame through their singing and our gladness that we could be part of Roy's call to write music that would free people from the slavery of being homeless.

Then Hollis and Liz told about why they started the Growing Edge Fund in the first place, as a way to "fan the flame" of creativity in our community. They saw money as a way for Seekers to nourish hopes that maybe don't fit in the weekly budget anywhere, especially if we're paying off a large debt or when we're caught in saving for our children's education. Liz and Hollis were there to tell the story about how Seekers picked up the ball and put the Growing Edge Fund in our yearly budget, so we can "fertilize the garden" and give newness some protection as the signs of growth begin, to be a part of bringing those "First Fruits" into being. By then, I could hear the steady sound of fire, like a propane torch it was, burning there in the room. Yes. The coming of Pentecost breaks through our normal routines, comes when we're feeling vulnerable, maybe when we don't know how to ask for help. It's then that the fire flares.

Look again at the child you have in your hands, a picture of someone in this community, born into the world with such potential, such promise, such hope. And think of the growing

edge that goes beyond money – the power to bless, to hear one another into speech, to love one another into life. "First Fruits" of the Spirit.

I want to tell you the story of someone who called creativity out of me. In 1964, MC Richards wrote a book called *Centering in Pottery, Poetry and the Person*. In 1966, when Peter went to Vietnam as an Army captain, I began working with clay. MC's book gave me language for the spiritual work that was going on inside of me at that time. It changed my life! Gave me speech! I could hear her speak in my own language. It was a Pentecost experience!

Fifteen years later, I went to Pendle Hill where MC was giving a workshop and we connected deeply as friends. We've been in contact over the years, not often, but real. Two years ago, Peter and I clowned at her 80th birthday, interacting with the mentally handicapped villagers that she lives with at Camp Hill Village, enjoying the company of her artist friends from a long life of creative expression.

But last week, when she called, I heard a different tone in her voice. "I am going to have open heart surgery in a few weeks," she said, "because I really am not good at living with no energy." It felt important to go, so we carved out a day, drove up to Camp Hill near Valley Forge; went to talk and look at her paintings from last winter which she spent teaching with Matthew Fox in Oakland.

The paintings absolutely knocked me out! Icons they were. Simple images painted in metallic colors. The cosmic egg, contained, with a vibrant yolk. The fireball image, glowing through the peephole of a kiln. And then, the middle one broke open, spilled out, like the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And another series full of color and movement but still echoes of the egg and yolk form. And finally, the last one in grays, but vibrant, with light in an aura around an unseen egg with a glowing nimbus of red-orange where the yolk would be. I could

hardly breath it was so powerful, so full of portent. It was the soul-work cycle I have been trying to write about this year.

I realize how starved I have been for color, for this kind of talk. The paintings went in deep, directly, heart to heart through her hand and our eyes. Then, on the way back to her room, she said, "I didn't know I needed encouragement for this time. Then you called and just came. What a wonder this has been."

Encouragement. At the growing edge. The place where we may be waiting for "first fruits" to appear, in that place of not knowing, of not yet. Let the children we are holding in our hands be our cloud of witnesses, calling us forth – to create, to BE who we are truly meant to be.

May God give us eyes to see and ears to hear as the Spirit moves among us today. Amen.