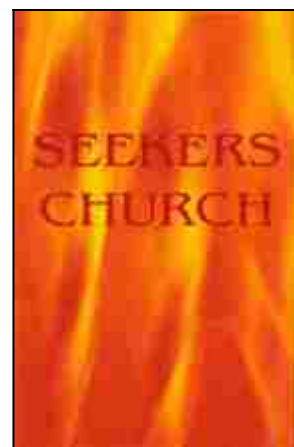


“Born Again: Stem Cells in the Body of Christ” by Peter Bankson

12 June 2011



Pentecost

INTRODUCTION

Today we observe the mystery of Pentecost, that day when the followers of Jesus were transformed by the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Confused and chaotic, they fell into a new way of being together, a new way of being present to each other, a new way of being present to the world – in the world but, in some fresh way, not of the world.

For many of us, Pentecost marks the birth of the Church, the Body of Christ, a time when the community of those on the Way with Jesus woke up to the reality that the Creator of all was still at play, making all things new. The surprise was that

they had a new role in this emerging reality, if only they could let themselves be changed.

Pentecost is a vibrant reminder that the Creator isn't finished, that the Holy Spirit is constantly calling us into new places to take up new roles as part of the Good News of Christ. One day we're clear about who we are and what we're about. Then we're asleep or mired up to the hubcaps in some dark place of depressed unknowing. And then, suddenly, things are different. When that happens it often feels like we've been born ... again – birth pains and all! But how can that be? How can we go back into the womb now that we're all grown up? And what about the self we've somehow left behind?

The Creation we live in is growing and changing, and our planet needs different things. Someone needs to find fresh ways to heal the sick and care for the elderly, to feed the hungry and help the unemployed find work, to free the captives and build communities of peace and patience. That takes a lot of different skills and talents, from a lot of different people. And sometimes that means that some of us who've grown comfortable on our well-traveled paths, using our well-honed tools, are always being called to wake up to something new. Maybe that's a fresh way of understanding what it means to be "Born Again."

Pondering this cycle of change has led me, for some strange reason, to think about stem cells. I mean those cells in our developing bodies that begin to grow up in our bodies full of potential but not specifically marked for a particular role. Then, at some point, a DNA switch is thrown and they are transformed into some specific thing the body needs in a particular place: muscle, blood, skin, bone... Suddenly, it's

as though these cells which might have been almost any part of the body have been called to a particular role, committed to make a particular contribution to the health of the body.

When Paul was writing, the human body seemed an apt metaphor for the Church. What might the emergence of our understanding of stem cells offer us in the way of understanding call and commitment in a new way? Is this the anything more than familiar story of growing up to be a preacher, or baker or candlestick maker? I think so. I think it has something to say about being called to something new even as an adult.

This year Pentecost got me thinking about at least three things:

- Waking up is a surprise. Suddenly we see ourselves in a new light.
- We are different – diverse – and that's and that's the way God wants it.
- This isn't the first time, or the last time, that God will do something new.

Wake up! There's a surprise waiting for you. We heard it in the first reading for this week, that description of the coming of the Holy Spirit from the book of Acts:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place... a sound like the rush of a violent wind ... All were amazed and perplexed... 'What does this mean?'

When I've read this in the past I've usually focused on how individuals were changed that day – the tongues of fire

marking them, the ability to communicate with people from different lands and cultures. This year I'm freshly aware of them as a body, together but dispersed in a bigger gathering, present to the wider world. Suddenly, there they were: different, particular, diverse parts of the emerging Church that enabled it to relate to people from all over the known world.

It was this international crowd that recognized that these Galileans were a body linked together by something different. Some of the cynics thought it was just leftovers from an all-night party, but others heard Peter as he told them to expect more surprises:

'Men and women of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem ... listen to what I say. ... these are not drunks, as you suppose... No, ... God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

Wake up! There's a surprise waiting for you. That's one message from Pentecost.

Another Pentecost insight is that we are different, diverse, and that's an advantage. The body needs different parts to live, to BE and to DO. Our Epistle lesson for this week reminds us that

... there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and

there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

This understanding, that each of us is called to a particular place in the Body of Christ, is at the core of our call to be together with Jesus on the Way. In the call of Seekers Church we say:

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 want to be a community where each of us is recognized in some particular way, and that as part of this community each of us can find the support and accountability we need to empower others to be about God’s work in the world.

Like those stem cells, we’re called to differentiate for the health of the Body and the effectiveness of what it does. Even though differentiation might be really hard, we’re promised a place with meaning and purpose, even if that might be hard to see at first.

Last week I was amused to recognize myself as part of a very temporary “body” in a new but recognizable way. I was attending the 50th reunion of my college graduation. In our

tradition, the 50th reunion class is invited to wear these traditional crimson (flame-colored) blazers as we all march into the great court that forms the focal point of the main campus at MIT. As I approached the morning of this year's commencement exercises I became increasingly aware that although this was the 50th anniversary of my graduation it would be the first time I would march with my class at graduation.

You see, 50 years ago I barely made it to that commencement.

Here's the back-story. In June of 1961, although I had enough credits to meet the Institute's requirement for graduation, I fell one credit short of my department's course requirement for a "major" in political science and economics. The department faculty voted to hold my diploma. But I had an advocate from the department of my "minor" in electrical engineering, who argued at the full faculty meeting that since I was heading for a Regular Army commission and wouldn't be going on to graduate school any time soon, they ought to let me go.

I got a letter saying I could march at the next commencement, which was enough to let me receive my commission and "commence" my first career. So, on graduation day in 1961 I stood in the back of the auditorium with Marjory, and her parents and mine, and watched as my class crossed the stage into the future. By the time of the next graduation procession I was shepherding about 50 young soldiers way out in the Arctic tundra and couldn't take time off to go march in a college parade in Cambridge. Instead, I got to march in a parade just about every month ... sometimes on skis!

So the graduation procession last week was a bigger deal for me than I'd first imagined. It was a kind of temporary community, gathered to celebrate a time long, long ago. How would I find my place in line, in that very temporary community? As the moment approached and my classmates all lined up two-by-two, I found myself holding back. Did I really have a place here?

When we entered the Great Court, there I was, at the back of the line carrying one of those folding walkers, the kind with two front wheels and tennis balls on the back legs. Not what I'd imagined, but not bad! It turned out that one of my classmates, who had fallen the week before and broken a hip, was there on a four-hour pass from the hospital, in a wheelchair being pushed by his son who was there for his own reunion. The son was having a challenge negotiating the curb and the grass pushing the wheelchair and carrying the walker at the same time. He needed a hand, and I had one to spare. Somehow it felt very right to be at the back of the line, making sure we all got in. As I took the walker I could see the relief on the faces of two guys who were also trying to understand their place in line.

We each need a place to belong. And if the body is going to be a creative, healthy being, it needs many different kinds of parts. That's good news because each person is unique. The challenge is to let the Holy Spirit show us our place in line, and let God mobilize the DNA of some new call, even if it doesn't quite fit our personal long-range plan.

In her Church of the Saviour classic "Eighth Day of Creation,"

Elizabeth O'Connor begins with an observation about the importance of diversity for the health of the body.

We are sometime asked [she said,] what accounts for the diversity of our community. In answering we must always speak of the evoking and exercising of gifts... When we describe "Church" we like to say it is a gift-evoking, gift-bearing community... This is why "Church" implies a people; no one enters into the fullness of his [or her] being except in community with other persons. No community develops the potential of its corporate life unless the gifts of each of its members re evoked and exercised on behalf of the whole community.

No stem cell is called to develop its potential in the isolation of a test tube. It takes a body to provide the place for growth. And each body needs many diverse parts, each doing what they're called to do so the body can survive and thrive.

We think of this as calling forth and affirming the gift of each member, so that they have authority within the body at the point of that gift. It sound like the insight about the Body that Paul offers right after our Epistle reading for this week. In First Corinthians Chapter 12 Paul observes:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ... Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?

In the call of Seekers Church we see ourselves out there in the world, ready to be part of the Good News:

For us, Christian servanthood is based on empowering others within the normal structures of our daily lives (work; family and primary relationships; and citizenship) as well as through special structures for service and witness.

Recently Brenda did a survey of where we're volunteering in the way. These are some of the places where we've "...dispersed to live out Christian servanthood in the ordinary structures of our lives:" Joseph's House, Potter's House, Wellspring renewal, Bokamoso, cycling clubs, our local folk festival, dance events, recycling programs, L'Arche, Jubilee Jumpstart day care, personal support for seniors, hospital chaplaincy, watershed cleanup, animal rights advocacy, support for those with learning disabilities, homeless services, emergency and interim housing, FLOC,, mentoring students, ...

The stem cell, now grown up as part of the spine, has the authority to hold the body erect. And the whole body is not a vertebra. I felt good carrying that walker up the aisle, thanking the families of this year's graduates, knowing that we were different, and that we each had a role to play. We are

all different, and that's an advantage. But we shouldn't get too comfortable.

God is always doing something new. Things are always changing. This isn't the first time, or the last, that we find ourselves in surprising circumstances.

For a long time, what we knew about stem cells was that they were present only at birth, and once they'd received their assignment, they were committed for life. No bone could ever expect to become part of the heart.

Then, in 2006, medical researchers discovered that it was possible to influence an adult cell to act like a stem cell and take on a new role in a different part of the body! These revitalized cells, known as "pluripotent stem cells" taken from the skin could be mobilized to claim a role as nerve or bone.

One day this discovery may allow healers to take a healthy cell from an ailing person, influence it to take on a new role and place it in the body where it can heal or restore diseased or missing parts of the body. In my mind this is like what we know can happen in an earthworm or a starfish when it regenerates a part that has been severed.

Although the practical applications of this may be years away, the concept highlights something that we know about in individuals, and have seen in communities: It is possible to receive a new call, to begin again ... to be "born again"

without going back into the womb.

If we look around, God is always doing something new. Just like Isaiah 43, where we hear the Creator announce: "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland." If we consider the possibility that the Creator of the Universe is still at work, and that we are still like clay in the potter's hands, then being called by God to something new shouldn't be a surprise. Often when we see something new and good emerging in someone else it feels encouraging. But when we sense something new emerging in ourselves, it feels threatening.

Part of what Pentecost acknowledges is the reality of this kind of creative emergence, this commitment by our Creator to keep on creating.

As we look around here, there are lots of signs of new life:

- Last week we heard that Jackie has been granted her visa and green card!
- Kimberly has a new job!
- Jake's prayers have been answered and Rent-A-Hand is growing!
- Carroll Café just completed its second, very encouraging season, welcoming the folk community into our space.
- Our conversation on race and diversity with Covenant Christian Community continues with a film next weekend.
- There's an emerging team to help expand "Care Packs for the Homeless" to other congregations.

- Eyes to See Ears to Hear Peace Prayer Mission group is working with the New Story Leadership to support community-building among young Jewish and Muslim leaders.
- And Seekers Church is sponsoring this year's pilgrimage to Guatemala for two dozen folks from around the country.

These are just some of the new things that are emerging, some of those places where we feel we're being called to bring new life. Our efforts may be small, but when it comes to Good News, every little bit counts. As the Gospel for the week reminds us: "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." (John 7:38) If we're on the Way with Jesus, then it seems logical to me that what he taught would be visible in what we're doing.

Last week Marjory and I got a letter from a man we met at her reunion. He was a journalist who has written extensively about, and from, Viet Nam. When we got home there was a copy of one of his books with a nice note establishing contact for more conversation. At the end of his letter he wrote:

Also ... I got curious about the Seekers Church and had a look at the website. Sounds as if this is a place for Christians who are more interested in acting like Christians than in telling everybody else how Christian they are. Hope you will forgive a nonbeliever for observing that in my experience, that's a lot more unusual than it ought to be. But when I do encounter it, I am thankful and glad.

God is always doing something new. But it takes courage and commitment to let ourselves be changed in unexpected ways. Pentecost is a time to say "Yes" to God's invitation to be a plenipotent stem cell in the Body of Christ, willing to be born again into something new for the health of the Body and

the strength of the Good News it is called to offer to the world..

CLOSING

Call comes through community. Stem cells diversify within the Body to meet the need for different parts with diverse gifts. Healing and renewal can come to adult bodies as existing cells are transformed to accept new roles.

And Pentecost reminds us that the Creator of the universe is still at work, and we are part of the clay in the hands of that Holy Potter. Welcome to the Body of the Living Christ.

I thought I'd close with an observation by David Whyte, from his poem "Everything is Waiting for You:"

Your great mistake is to act the drama
as if you were alone. As if life
were a progressive and cunning crime
with no witness to the tiny hidden
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding
out your solo voice. ...

Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into
the conversation. ...
All the birds

and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

David Whyte, from *Everything is Waiting for You*
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Wake up! Something surprising is waiting for you.

We are different, diverse, and that's an advantage.

God is always doing something new.

Fear not, and keep praying! You are not alone.

Amen!