

Reflection (Laura)

I want to tell you about Sara Miles.

Sara was raised as an atheist and lived an enthusiastically secular life as a restaurant cook and a writer.

Then early one winter morning, for no earthly reason, she wandered into a church... and everything changed.

In her book "Take This Bread", she wrote "I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian or, as I thought of it rather less politely, a religious nut."

But as she entered the doors of St Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco on a whim, she ate a piece of bread and took a sip of wine and found herself radically transformed.

At the age of 46, this was her first communion and that mysterious sacrament has sustained her ever since - in a faith she'd scorned and in work she'd never imagined.

In her amazing story, she talks about how the seeds of her conversion were sown, and what her life has been like since she took that bread.

I'm sure you've heard similar stories... or perhaps even experienced them yourselves –

stories of an unexplainable spark of new – or greater – awareness...

stories of awakening – stories that describe some new sense of life... of purpose.

I have my own conversion story...

I've shared bits of it here before so won't take time to retell it now...

but it was an experience so powerful that I literally felt as though the Spirit of God had picked me up, turned me around... and punted me down a new path.

An experience so powerful that it has held me and sustained me in my own faith for almost 30 years.

I'm sharing Sara's story... and this bit of my own... because today is Pentecost!

I love Pentecost!

I love the story Carl read for us from Acts.

Its so dramatic.

I can feel the Spirit's energy whirling around that story of fire and wind and bold urgency!

A story of how God's Spirit encounters ordinary human beings and wonderful, unexpected things begin to happen.

Pentecost is often celebrated as the birthday of the church, but it was actually an important Jewish festival before it became a Christian one. It was one of three 'pilgrimage' festivals and took place 50 days after Passover... the celebration of Israel's liberation from Egypt.

It was a time to remember the story and give thanks for the new community that had come together - living in a radically different way than they had in Egypt.

The story in Acts is ALSO about community coming together to live in a radically different way as the church.

The once timid, frightened and discouraged group of Jesus' followers became forceful, confident advocates for their experience of the Risen Christ... a new faith movement and community began.

This Spirit of God works in and for the world... working to bring the fullness of God's love – of God's purposes for the world – into being.

So whenever we see signs of God's purpose... in acts of love, peace, and justice – we know God's Spirit is at work.

But, of course, we also know that the church sometimes has had... and continues to have... trouble staying on track with God's purposes for the church community and for the wider world.

Why does it seem so easy to get off track?

In a book called "Living the Questions", the authors write "in many faith traditions, it is tradition itself that is worshipped, held up as the whole purpose of the religious enterprise. Be it infatuation with "smells and bells" or resistance to

inclusive language, many faithful people have confused defense of their understanding of right practice and right thinking with what they call faith. They insulate themselves from the predictable, demanding, transforming nature of the spirit with a fierce, pious, unbending commitment to the church and its traditions. They practice what Richard Rohr has called a “cosmetic piety” intended to look good on the surface, but lacking any real depth or complexity. Defense of the changeless nature of their revealed truth becomes a virtue, to be aspired to, regardless of how lifeless the practice itself becomes.”

Resisting, ignoring.. even squashing what very well might be the movement of the Spirit... as a way to protect or to stay comfortable... is our greatest sin.

Pentecost is the fulfillment of the Prophecy of Joel, the scripture says: “in the last days, God said, I will pour out my spirit upon all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your young people will see visions, and your old people will dream dreams...”

There have been many many times here at McClure... and I’m sure this is true in Radville as well... when this prophecy has come true...for individuals within the congregation and collectively for the community of faith.

The winds of the spirit blew through this community in 1966... firing folks up to become great prophets with the vision of a new church community to serve this part of Saskatoon... and McClure United Church was born.

And again after many years of worshipping together in a school gymnasium and committing ourselves to important outreach work in the community.... the mighty spirit blew again... firing up a whole new group of people to dream big... and this began the process of creating what is now McClure Place and the sanctuary some of us are worshipping in today.

So many times over the years we have been guided and pushed and pulled by God’s Spirit to come together... to dream big... to have faith – trusting in God’s purpose for us.

The same wild, creative and unpredictable Spirit that helped us come together... and grow... and build... and then expand has also led us to become an Affirming

Ministry, publicly naming our desire to be a place of welcome and love for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities....

It has led us to reach out, befriend and support the less privileged in our city.... and beyond.

We've provided food, clothing and other necessities to those in need... we've delivered meals... offered rides.... planted hearts... collected bottles... tied orange ribbons, walked in marches, baked pies... baked potatoes.

We've learned technology... built partnerships... made new friends in Radville.. Carlyle... and Abbey...worshipping together in new and creative ways.

We have helped bring many many individuals and families to Canada as refugees and supported them in their dream of living in peace.

The winds of the Spirit have blown through us and within us... the flames of the spirit have fired us up, many times and in many ways over the years.

And even in the times when we couldn't quite feel it... when we didn't see much movement... the Spirit has been here waiting for us to open our hearts and minds to the possibilities – waiting for a dream to spark – for a vision to take hold.

Perhaps we need to think of the Holy Spirit's movement not so much as a grand gesture – spiking flames and rushing winds – and more as the energy of love... God's love... among Christ's people.

The Holy Spirit is the energy of God that moves our hearts toward each other and toward all of humanity... all of creation.

Within our depths as people of faith, the Holy Spirit is the fire that warms our hearts – offering protection from selfishness, apathy, greed.

Within our depths, the wind blows... and we miss opportunities when we try to contain it or put it out.

The fire needs to burn... and the wind needs to blow – that's where our energy comes from and we need that energy to live love, and peace, and justice... to live God's purpose for our world.

I want to return for a second to the story of Sara Miles.

How did her encounter with the Spirit change her life? Sarah was not the woman her friends expected to see suddenly praising Jesus.

She was certainly not the kind of person the government had in mind to run a “faith-based charity.”

Religion for her was not about angels or good behavior or piety; it was about real hunger, real food, and real bodies.

Before long, she turned the bread she ate at communion into tons of groceries, piled on the church’s altar to be given away.

The first food pantry she established provided hundreds of poor, elderly, sick, mentally ill, and marginalized people with lifesaving food and a sense of belonging.

The Holy Spirit, described in scripture by the symbols of unpredictable, uncontrollable wind and fire transformed Sara life – and transformed her community.

When the Spirit is active and present, its not just about ‘me’, but about ‘we’.

Its about the creation of a new kind of inclusive, welcoming community based on love.

And for sure its not often easy.

Sarah discovered this as she trudged the rain through bleak housing projects, sat on the curb wiping the runny nose of an unwell man, struggled with her atheist family and doubting friends.

The Spirit brings change.

Some of it is welcome, some not, but it is always important – and often necessary.

Christianity is not so much about things we should or shouldn’t do... and it certainly isn’t about just being nice.

It’s reveling in the beauty of creation...

its about taking part in the wonderment of it all by living, loving and being.

It’s about embracing the pain and the suffering of the world and transforming it into new life.

Its about harnessing the creative spirit that is so much a part of what it means to be human.

I want to close with another story I heard... about a confirmation class.

In one session, the leader was sharing about the festivals and seasons of the Christian year and when they came to the discussion of Pentecost he explained that Pentecost was when the church was gathered together and the Holy Spirit came like tongues of fire upon their heads.

He told how the disciples began to speak in all the languages of the world.

Most of the youth took it in stride but one of them looked astonished, her eyes wide and she said, "oh my... I don't think we were in church that day".

The beauty of that moment is not that she misunderstood Pentecost... but that she understood the church.

In her mind, there was the possibility that the event of Pentecost could have happened, as it could happen... as it does happen...

So let's let the wind blow the cobwebs from our mind and replace them with a fiery passion and commitment to a gospel of justice, freedom and peace, love and joy.

May God's Spirit warm our hearts, and may we find within us the courage and strength to share the gospel of love with a hurting world, remembering that whatever we do – we do not do it alone.

God has called us... God has called each and every one of us... by name.

Thanks be to God.