



Holy Spirit the Defender

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the Day of Pentecost, May 23, 2021

Ezekiel 27:1-14; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

In the name of the Spirit of God, who makes everything new. Amen.

Many of you have probably seen the musical *Les Miserables*, adapted from Victor Hugo's classic novel. At the heart of the story is a man named Jean Valjean in France, who was convicted for stealing bread when he was hungry, and served many years in prison. He finally escapes when an earthquake shatters the prison. He is understandably bitter and angry; the best years of his life have been taken from him for a crime he only committed because he was hungry and had no other options, and now as a hunted fugitive, he has nothing. A compassionate priest gives him some shelter for the night, and before dawn he leaves, stealing the priest's silver candlesticks so he has money to live on. The police catch him and bring him back to the priest. But the priest refuses to accuse him, and instead insists that he had given Valjean the candlesticks, and that Valjean had even forgotten a more expensive silver item which he now gives to him as well. So instead of being convicted returned to prison, he is set free. This unlooked-for experience of mercy and compassion utterly changes Valjean's life. Although he has to continue to live as a fugitive, he now forever has compassion for others who are suffering from poverty and degradation, and for the rest of his life he passes on the mercy that had been shown to him.

Today is the day of Pentecost, that great feast sometimes called the Church's birthday, when we celebrate the Holy Spirit descending on the disciples in the upper room and giving them the ability to speak in other languages. Pentecost happened fifty days after Easter, when Jesus was raised from the dead. I imagine it's hard to imagine what that has to do with life in 2021, or for that matter with Jean Valjean and *Les Miserables*. Pentecost is the next stage of the disciples' spiritual journey, and in a way it echoes the experience of the Israelites long ago in their journey of liberation from Egypt.

Both Easter and Pentecost happened on Jewish holidays. Easter happened on Passover, which was when the people of Israel were liberated from slavery in Egypt. And Pentecost, happened on the Jewish holiday now called Shavu'ot, which commemorates when Moses received the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai fifty days after liberation from Egypt. It's all a progression of what happens when people are liberated to become who God intended them to be. First is simple liberation--Easter, crossing the Red Sea. Then, in the strange wilderness of the desert, and the strange reality of life without Jesus' physical presence, God gives them guidance. To the Israelites, God gives commandments on stone tablets; to the disciples, God gives the Holy Spirit, to guide them from within. And something about this experience was so joyful and powerful for the disciples that the reading from Acts describes them acting as if they were drunk! So what was it exactly about receiving the Holy Spirit that gave them such joy? What was the guidance the Spirit gave them? Today's gospel reading from John gives us a clue.

In that reading, just before Jesus is arrested, he tells his disciples that after he is gone he will send them the Holy Spirit, whom he calls an “Advocate”, to be with them forever, to reveal the truth to them, even the truth they could not yet bear. Now I’m a lawyer, and I usually associate the word “Advocate” with prosecution or political advocacy. But in Greek, the word Advocate was actually the word used for a *defense* attorney. So Jesus is saying that the Holy Spirit will be their defender; someone who is standing in their corner defending them. Someone who will see and invite the best in them. A defense attorney is someone who advocates for those who are accused, whether rightly or wrongly.

We often talk about Jesus as being particularly on the side of the poor and the oppressed, and that is certainly true. But the incredible thing is that the Way of Jesus, which is so much about forgiveness, is also about liberation for the guilty. It is about the healing of both oppressed and the oppressor. This is because evil distorts the humanity of everyone, both those who commit evil and those who suffer because of it. Although the Spirit does convict us about what needs to change in us, the Spirit does not offer punishment and retribution for the wrongs we have committed, but a way of compassion, healing and restorative justice instead. In our moments of greatest degradation and weakness and mistakes, the Spirit is here for us like the priest was for Jean Valjean. Accusation and punishment never transformed anyone. The radical undeserved compassion and mercy of God does. This doesn’t mean our bad

behavior is just swept under the rug. It means that because we are loved in spite of it, we are empowered to change.

And for those who have suffered a great deal, this kind of mercy brings about a joy that is too deep for words. For Jean Valjean, that one unexpected moment of undeserved mercy transformed his entire life. Some of us have been learning more about the vast extent of white body supremacy in our nation, how very much the nation and indeed the Church have been instruments of great evil and suffering for people of color. We've learned about harm to the earth, and so much else in the world that is wrong, including sexual violence. Perhaps some of us have felt an enormous guilt and grief and hopelessness about the unearned privilege we have. And perhaps others of us have struggled with a deep sense of shame, because we were not loved for who we were, or were not protected from predators, or for many other reasons. Perhaps some of us might be tempted to become accusing and blaming of other people who don't yet understand things. Truthfully, this is a kind of fundamentalism I see too often among progressive circles, and I am guilty of it myself sometimes. But into all of that comes the Spirit of God, who is powerful enough to make living beings out of dry bones like the reading from Ezekiel describes. Pentecost is that moment in the progression of God's powerful work in human life when head and heart and body all align, when suddenly the doors open and the love pours in, and we realize, *We are loved, we are healed and set free. We are both humbled and forgiven, we now see ourselves and others as God sees us, and our lives will never be the same.* This is not just understood intellectually.

It is an experience so powerful it can't be expressed in words we understand, but needs groaning and music and dance.

Jurgen Moltmann was a German who was drafted into the German Army during World War II, and was a prisoner of war for three years afterward. When he saw the pictures of what his country had done in Auschwitz, he wanted to die. The burden of his real guilt was beyond bearing. He had no particular religion, but he encountered English Christians who befriended him while he was a POW in their country, even though Germans had bombed England to rubble. They showed him a genuine mercy and love that his people did not deserve.

Moltmann the oppressor became Moltmann the disciple of Jesus, and he ended up becoming the father of liberation theology.

He writes eloquently about a God who offers healing and liberation for both oppressed and the oppressor.

Throughout history, there have been followers of Jesus filled with the Holy Spirit who are empowered to great acts of compassion and new life beyond all expectation, especially those who have suffered and also those who had been guilty. Those who had committed evil had to admit the truth and make amends. Others who had degraded by oppression learned to accept their innate dignity conferred by the Spirit of God that no one could ever take away from them. The Spirit in all of them was a defender who whispered in them the ultimate truth of God's love and compassion, that enabled them to face dignity and humanity of all people—oppressed and oppressor—and to turn and receive the boundless joy of God.

And here we are today, huddled after a year of pandemic and facing the devastating truth of systemic racism in our nation. In a few days we will honor the first anniversary of the murder of George Floyd. We are here in this nation, white and Black and Indigenous and other people of color, women and men and non-binary, so many layers of identity woven through us all. And instead of sleepwalking through Pentecost as an old tradition today, let us ask the Holy Spirit to empower us no less intensely than She empowered the disciples long ago, when they were honoring their ancient tradition. Let us ask for the radical liberation and healing that both we and our church and our country so desperately need. Let us ask for the joy that comes from being given the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to guide us into the truth, perhaps truth we haven't yet been ready to bear—not because it's so awful, but because it's so joyful, so boundless and full of love. Come, Holy Spirit, Come. Turn our lives upside down. Heal us and make us agents of your healing. Amen.