

A Solid Foundation—Acts 2: 1-21
(May 20, 2018-Pentecost Sunday)

The scripture this week got me thinking about founding stories, stories of beginnings. I got thinking about the birth of my children and I realized that how I think about their births or their founding stories has a lot to do with how I perceive them now. I see Calvin as a passionate, free spirit and what I remember of his birth, a home birth was the wild weather, the hot humid wind blowing through the large maples, bending branches, the threat of thunderstorms. I see Josh as shy and strong-willed, what I remember is that he was stuck in the birth canal. By comparison, which they say you should never do with your children I have experienced Jacinta as the easiest to raise, she is easy going and thoughtful, I remember that while Andrea labored with the boys throughout the night, Jacinta was born at two o'clock in the afternoon after a two-hour labour.

Acts 2 is the story of the beginning of the church. It is in a sense also a founding story, in that it is written looking backwards and it is imprinted with the experience of the community from which it originated. The writer of this story wrote it some 50 to 60 years after Jesus' death. He is trying to explain how a strong and vibrant community of faith grew from an event as horrific as the execution of Jesus. But more than a founding story, Acts 2 is a foundational story. A founding story is about facts as we remember them, like saying German immigrants played an important role in the founding of this community. Acts 2 isn't a story about facts, it's a story that imaginatively employs vivid imagery to proclaim the source of the early church's authority and power and it's reason for being. Acts 2 is a foundational story; it proclaims the church's foundation in and by the Spirit.

It is an attempt to answer the question of how a defeated and despondent group of fishermen, tax collectors, women and peasants created such a vibrant community of faith? The answer is a realization by that early community that something more had been at work than simply themselves; they experienced a power that saw them through some horrendous stuff, a power that was steadfast and loyal when all other powers had abandoned them. So they told a story of that power, rich in the imagery of fire and wind. Jesus' death should have been the end, but it wasn't.

We all have foundational stories, whether we are aware of them or not, stories that proclaim our reason for being and the source of our authority and power. Sometimes our foundational stories can be weak, like building a house on a foundation of sand or on the edge of tectonic plates where the ground shifts, bends and breaks. If we were raised in a home where there was abuse or little love, a home where our basic needs for security and affection were not met our foundational story might say to us that we are inherently of little value, that our value depends on our ability to please others and get their affirmation. Our authority and power rest in the hands of others, our reason for being is to please. In our culture, a foundational story that we often tell ourselves is that our value depends on the level of success, achievement and social acceptance we attain in our lifetime. Our value depends on our contribution to the economy, our possessions, and our status. Our authority and power comes from our success, our value depends on our productivity.

When our foundational stories crumble, begin to give way under our feet, the life of faith tells us that there is a deeper story, a firmer story, a solid foundational story. It's the story of the Spirit. It is a Spirit that is always present. Nevertheless, we can only feel and harness its power when we stop relying on our own power. The discipline of the life of faith is to make that kind of surrender to the Spirit's power a daily habit, a way of being. Most often, however and at least initially, surrender to the Spirit is brought on by circumstances that make it abundantly clear that we are powerless. That was certainly the case for those first Jesus followers. The story tells us that they were gathered in a room praying, they didn't know what else they could do. Recovering addicts refer to this as "hitting

bottom”. Hitting bottom doesn’t just happen to addicts however; it happens to anyone whose foundational story crumbles and gives way under their feet. It happens to the successful businessman who retires only to find himself in an intensive care unit after suffering a heart attack. It happens to the middle-aged woman who suffers a mental and emotional breakdown when years of childhood abuse catch up to her. It happens to many in our senior years when age strips us of independence.

Let me tell you a story about this. I had a friend who struggled with addiction for many years. At one point, he had his “hitting bottom” experience. For my friend it was the threat of his wife leaving and taking the kids. The threat of losing his family shook him out of denial into accepting the reality of the moment, of what he had done to himself and his family. He started looking for help. He was one of those people that always read the newspaper from cover to cover. He looked down in the community events section in the paper and there was a 12-step meeting listed for his particular addiction. He was surprised; he had never seen it before. How had he not seen it? He went into the recycling pile to look at previous editions of the paper and discovered that the meeting had been listed there all along.

The gift of powerlessness is that it renders the ego useless, we get out of our own way and are opened up to possibilities that we could not otherwise have seen. Powerlessness stops us; we don’t know what to do. The past is gone or discredited and the future is perhaps hopeless or at the very least uncertain. All that we have is the moment. Because all we have is the moment we start paying attention to the moment, we watch and we listen. That is when the Spirit makes its presence known. The Spirit can come in many forms; it can be a person, a book, an ad in the paper, sometimes a voice, a thought or a memory. The Spirit is the unrestricted presence of God in which our life wakes up¹ to new paths, new possibilities that heal us by leading us back to our true selves, back to our foundation, ground on which it is safe to stand.

Pentecost is our foundational story as a people on the Christian journey of faith. It reminds us from whence we came, on whom we can depend and to whom we shall return. It reminds us of the source of our power and authority. In the midst of despair, it gives us hope that there is more to our story. It is our foundational story, it is solid, and it does not shift or give way. Thanks be to God.

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*.