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First Christian Church
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Spirit Dreamin'

(Joel 23a, 27b-28 NRSV) 23a O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God [for] I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame. 28 Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions."

Did you notice the beautiful image on the cover of our worship bulletin today?

It's a stained glass window rendering of the day of Pentecost. And what I really like about it for our celebration today of Pentecost is its symbolic representation of both the baptism of the Holy Spirit that came to those first disciples on that first day of Pentecost – thereby empowering them to become the church – and the baptism of water that Jesus told those who would be His followers to perform. Do you see the Spirit, like “tongues of fire” coming from above? Do you see the bright blue waters below? And in that story of the first Pentecost, the story that we heard and saw in our Video Call to Worship from Eugene Petersen's translation, there are two things that connect the two kinds of baptisms.

The first connection is the baptisms of new believers, the first members of that first church, that occurred a few verses past what we heard this morning. Here's how Luke describes the scene that occurred after Peter and the disciples and those first followers received that rush of Spirit, and after Peter had preached to the assembled multitudes there in Jerusalem a few verses later in the second chapter of Acts:

be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for

you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him..... So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added (Acts 2:38, 40-41 NRSV)

Now even though it is every preacher's secret egotistical dream that his or her sermon would be so effective that 3000 people would immediately believe and want to be baptized, that's not the connection I want to talk about this morning.

For there's a second connection between the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the baptism in water in response to that Holy Spirit – baptisms that we shall [have] witness[ed] and perform[ed] ourselves this morning – and that's through the word “dream.” To dream. Peter said it when he quoted the prophet Joel whose words said that with the coming of the Holy Spirit God's own children would be given the power to dream powerful dreams, life-giving dreams, life-changing dreams, world-changing dreams even. Both baptism and Pentecost are about dreaming.

For you see God is **always** seeking to do a new thing in your life and in mine; God has big dreams for all of us. And that could be the subject itself of a whole sermon series - the dreams that God has for this creation that He so loves and those who caught that dream and changed the world in ways large or small. But we'll save that for another time, and this morning I simply want to name two dreams that I think God has for you and me, two dreams that each and every one of us ought to find ourselves caught up with and animated by as we remember our own baptisms, or as we contemplate the possibility of baptism, or as we simply seek to attune ourselves with the dreams that God has for our lives.

The **first** dream that God has for us at through this powerful symbol of baptism,

the thing that should mark and make our lives always, is **gratitude**. The older I get the more convinced I am that this is the fount from which every Christian virtue, every well-lived life springs. In this regard, I've quoted preacher Gardner Taylor before, but I'm going to quote him again: For in one of his most profound lines he said this: ***"I have never known anyone who was truly grateful who was at the same time small or petty or bitter or mean or greedy or selfish or who could take any pleasure in anyone else's pain."*** I think that just few moments of reflection by all of those in this room will show how true this is. It is the same spirit that the old gospel song expresses in the line *"And I'll sing those old songs again, and I'll thank the Lord for every place I've been."*

Now, lest you think I am pitifully Pollyannaish, I know that there are bad things that happen. I know that bad things happen even to good people. I know that there are things that should profoundly fuel our passions for change and not simply our acquiescence to what is. But I invite us all to please remember this: to be a grateful person, to be able to thank God for one's life and the places it takes you, is not ever, ever to say that God wills bad things for you or me or anyone. To be a grateful person is to always realize that God is in the midst of everything always, always seeking to bring good out of evil, always seeking to bring what is even better out of what is already good and right. God is never absent. Do you hear the difference? **God doesn't do evil, but God is always in the midst of evil working for the good.** Even when hard times come our way – which they have and will to us all, the gospel of Jesus Christ reminds us that God is always with us, that your eternal hope and significance and

destiny is always and forever safe with God. That is part of what Dr. Taylor means by his statement: How can any of us be mean or small-spirited or take joy in the hurts of other when what is at the center of our soul is the profound assurance that God is with us come what may. What greater gratitude could there be? So, on this day in which we celebrate the moving of God's spirit on Pentecost, the enabling of the dream of the Church itself, and when we shall [have] celebrate[d] the baptism of three of our young persons, God's dream for all of us is that we will indeed know gratitude in the deepest places of our souls.

But there is a **second** baptism dream that follows on from that dreaming that the Spirit made possible on Pentecost, and it is the dream of what I would label "**Sacred Skepticism.**" Or we might call it "**Holy Questioning.**" Now, I am not talking about the kind of questioning so well expressed, say, in a toddler's endless and unanswerable series of why's – why is the sky blue, why is water clear, why do dogs bark and cats meow, and so on and so on. That kind of questioning is fitting and even helpful for a toddler first learning the limits of her world, but it is lame way to live as an adult, and it's a poor way to be a Christian. And I am not talking about the kind of questioning whose first cousin is cynicism, which sees conspiracies and slights and sinister meanings in everything – thus leading to a suspicious and narrow and sad life. No, the kind of questioning I am talking about is precisely **holy** questioning, **sacred** skepticism, because it is in fact **driven** by gratitude. Indeed, gratitude and such sacred skepticism are bound up together. For, you see, when you are profoundly grateful for your life, you

can't help but question those things that hurt God's world. In other words, our very gratitude for what God has done for us should also always prompt us to be questioning. Because God wants us to question all those sinful temptations to judge people by their economic class or their skin color or their gender. God wants us to question the belief – which so sadly and maddeningly steeps our culture – that happiness is a function of money and how much “stuff” you have. God wants us to question the notion that if you love some people that means that you therefore have to hate and exclude others. God wants us to question lines drawn too quickly between people, of self-righteousness masquerading as humility, of intolerance disguised as principle.

Do you see why this is **holy** Questioning, **sacred** skepticism, and why it is made possible by gratitude? For while we can always rest *assured* in the arms of God, that doesn't mean that we can ever rest *easy* in the face of injustice, in the face of hurt and pain, in the face of societal systems that hurt and oppress. Our very gratitude won't let us!

And so, while there is so much more we could say on this day, I will leave it there for now, knowing that on this day of baptism by Spirit and by water, God desires and dreams for all of us indeed a sense of awe-filled gratitude and a stubborn streak of sacred skepticism and holy questioning. May God's dream on this day for us get inside us, animate us, excite us, inspire us.