

SERMON: Day of Pentecost A

John 20:19-23

Preached Sunday, May 11, 2008 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

Rhiannon Barnes was 16 when she was diagnosed with cancer. The story of this Brevard High School student and her battle with cancer was published last week in *The Transylvania Times*. You may remember it by the stunning photograph of her and two female friends with shaved heads in 2006. Below it was a more recent photograph of her with a healthy, beaming smile and a full head of hair. The second was taken just prior to this year's senior prom.

Those of you who read the story may have been struck by her observations about discovering hope in her fight with cancer. She quoted someone who said, "Hope sees the invisible [and] feels the intangible." The teenager went on to say, "Hope does see the invisible, because I never knew what tomorrow was going to bring. Hope does feel the intangible, because I felt a power in my soul to beat this cancer and to live."*

Today is the Feast of Pentecost, the day when we celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit among the first followers of Jesus. But this is not simply a remembrance of something that happened in history. Pentecost also celebrates God's gift of the Spirit today to all — "to every race and nation," as our collect proclaims. In the Church, we call the Spirit of God "Holy" because, in our understanding of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is God. In the Gospel of John, Jesus declares that the Spirit will be our guide, advocate, comforter, and teacher. To reassure the disciples that they will not be alone and powerless after his departure, he says that he will give them the Spirit. After his resurrection, Jesus appears to them in the locked room, breathes on them, and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (v. 22).

I began with the story of Rhiannon Barnes because she and the first followers of Jesus had something in common: they needed to find hope in what otherwise could have been hopeless situations. At a time when all of her friends were healthy, active and enjoying their young lives, Rhiannon was staring death in the face. After the death of Jesus, the disciples were huddled together in fear, wondering if they might also be rounded up, condemned and punished. They all needed the ability to "see the invisible and feel the intangible."

The Holy Spirit certainly helps us in this regard. It gave the disciples the inspiration and power to go forth, proclaim the Good News and usher in the Kingdom of God. But there is something else that also makes this possible. Before we receive the Holy Spirit through grace and baptism, God first gives us the human spirit. And it is this prior gift which grants us the ability to recognize and embrace the Spirit of God. When Rhiannon Barnes says she felt a power in her soul "to beat ... cancer and to live," she is talking about the human spirit. It is that intangible-yet-powerful force that points her — and all of us — in the direction of life, love and hope.

In our celebration of the Holy Spirit, I think this other vital gift of God often gets overlooked. St. Paul distinguishes between the two in his writings. In the Letter to the Romans, for example, he declares that "all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.... When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are ... heirs of

God and joint heirs with Christ" (8:14 & 15b-17). God's Spirit bearing witness with our human spirit. Yes, we need the gift of the Holy Spirit. We need to release its power in our lives. It can, indeed, turn a two-dimensional faith into a three-dimensional spiritual journey — filled with awe and wonder. But none of this can happen unless we recognize and cultivate the human spirit that was given to all of us in creation.

I love the fact that John remembers Jesus giving the Holy Spirit to the disciples ... by breathing on them. It reminds me of God breathing life — the Hebrew word is "ruach" — into the first human being. In one account, God forms Adam out of the earth, then "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and [Adam] became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). It also reminds me of Ezekiel's description of the dry bones. At first, they are lifeless and without hope. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost" (37:11). But then, God declares that He will cause *ruach* — the spirit of life — to enter the dry bones, which re-animates them and brings them back to life.

All of this is probably on my mind for two reasons. The first is that I recently celebrated my 45th birthday. Among the many wonderful gifts I received, there was another which was neither expected, wonderful nor welcome. One day in the mail came a letter containing this [HOLD UP CARD]. Most of you probably cannot see it. But I'm here to confirm that it has the letters AARP on it, with my name imprinted below them. This was a rude awakening for two reasons. One is that I thought I wouldn't be getting this for at least another 5 years! The other is that I wanted to think that "middle age" would not begin officially until I was at least a half century old. But, as Gomer Pyle would say, "Surprise, surprise, surprise!" So, I guess I'm identifying with those dry bones a bit more closely than I wanted to at this point in my life.

The other reason for talking about the human spirit is that, last week, we had a wonderful celebration of Youth Sunday at our 9 a.m. liturgy. Even those who attended our other two services had the privilege of hearing a very fine sermon by our youth preacher, Christian Rudd. We've had Youth Sunday every year since I've been here at St. Philip's. But I can honestly say that this was the finest, most inspiring one I've ever witnessed. Fifteen families with school-age children were present, 10 of whom were here to take part in a special rite of passage for young teenagers. In that rite, the congregation was asked if we would support these young people and their parents "during their time of change and growth." We responded by saying, "We will. We welcome your presence among us, honoring the gifts of insight and freshness you bring us. We will sing and pray with you. We will challenge you to be generous and compassionate as you serve Christ in your home, at church, and in the world." After these sentences, we asked our youth, "Will you do the same for us?" and they replied, "We will, with God's help."

At the Youth Sunday Service, there was a fresh, vibrant, and creative spirit that you could feel. Now, I am not trying to claim that young people have a greater quantity of the spirit than those of us who are — let's say — 45 or older! But I believe they are often in touch with the Spirit in a way that the rest of us can forget too easily. We know that the Spirit is mysterious and unpredictable. As Jesus reminds us, it blows where it will. It brings us unexpected surprises. As we get older, the instinct of most people is to cling to what we know, to shy away from whatever is new or unforeseen. (As a lifelong Episcopalian, I think I've earned that right to say that we as a denomination are probably more guilty of this than many other Christian traditions.) But in this very resistance, we are — in effect — resisting the human spirit, and even the Holy Spirit. Which means that we are also resisting God.

I suspect it was someone with a very youthful human spirit who came up with the bumper sticker that says, “We are not human beings having *spiritual* experiences, we are spiritual beings having *human* experiences.” But from the Christian standpoint, we are both spirit and flesh. One connects us to God and eternity, while the other reminds us that we are formed of the earth — and therefore are limited, fragile and prone to temptation. Paul says that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit — the mortal playing host to what is eternal (1 Cor. 3:16-17 & 6:19). But because the spirit is so elusive and mysterious, it can hide away for long periods of time if we do not befriend and encourage it. We need children and young people to remind us what the Spirit feels like in all her glory. And they need our wisdom and experience to remind them how to make the best use of the Spirit’s creative energy.

Paul has reassuring words for us whenever we shy away from the Spirit’s unpredictability. He says that whatever gifts we have are from the Spirit. And the Spirit gives them to us for the common good, for building up the Body. We are all members of this one Body — “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free,” old and young alike. And our oneness is confirmed by the fact that we all drink of the one Spirit — which is God (1 Cor. 12).

Most of us have heard about the Olympic torch being carried from place to place in the run-up to this year’s Olympic games in China. Due to the political protests about China’s human rights record, we’ve also heard about the attempts to extinguish that flame, some of which have been successful. What I didn’t know until recently is that Olympic officials have a contingency plan for just such an occurrence.

Back in 1996 when our country hosted the summer Olympics, the torch made a 15,000-mile journey on its way to Atlanta. Harley Sheffield was a cyclist who was part of that relay, and he gained brief notoriety in an unexpected way. In May of that year, he was carrying the torch on his bike while riding across the Tacoma Narrows Bridge in Washington state. Suddenly, with television cameras rolling, Sheffield’s rear tire blew out, and he lost control of the bike. As a result, the torch’s flame went out. The rider survived the mishap with only minor injuries. But officials had no anxiety whatsoever about the apparent extinguishing of the Olympic flame. That’s because a van was accompanying Sheffield on his journey. And in that van was the unextinguished “master Olympic flame” — from which all the torches in the relay had been lit. So officials simply lit another torch from the master flame, and on it went with another cyclist.**

In Christian terms, we could say that the Holy Spirit is our master flame. There may be times when it feels as if our torch becomes very low or even non-existent. But we know that our torch can be re-lit from the flame that will never be put out. Thanks to the promise of Christ, we know that this fire — which offers life, love and hope to us all — is only a breath away.

* “Teen Chronicles Her Journey With Cancer,” *T. Times*, May 5, 2008, p. B1 (emphasis added).

***Houston Chronicle*, May 12, 1996, p. B16.