

Pentecost 2007

I met Moses the other day and danced with him. Moses is an inmate at the Baystate Correctional Facility in Norfolk. The truth is that I had met Moses on two other occasions but I did not know his name. This time Moses told me that he had changed his name from Leonard to Moses after making a Cursillo Retreat. This experience of the Holy Spirit was so powerful that he knew he had to change his name. He chose the name Moses. He didn't tell me why he had chosen the name but I wondered if it had to do with the experience of having been called by God, seen his face and was now living a new life. Let me tell you that Moses is a perfect name for this man. He is a member of a group of lay Dominicans inmates and also a member of a group of inmates who dance for the Lord, under the direction of Sr. Ann Mcneil, a spirit-filled wonderful sister of St. Joseph whose mission is share her gifts of dancing in the Spirit with the inmates. This past Thursday was the third time that I was assisting Sr. Ann in her ministry. Its being three days before Pentecost, I was anticipating that this visit to the prison might be a Pentecost experience for me. And it was.

The first part was waiting. You spend a lot of time just waiting around getting into the prison. Like those disciples in the upper room waiting for the Spirit, we had to wait and wait but even in the waiting there was an excitement about praying for the Holy Spirit to come. Finally we were given permission to enter into the prison and on our way to the Chapel where we would meet the inmates, Moses and others, we heard a voice screaming and shouting and banging on walls. I was told by Sister Ann that he was in Solitary Confinement. As disturbing as it was to hear these shouts and cries, I was struck by the image of a solitary confinement, especially in contrast to the image of Pentecost. The message of Pentecost is about community, about sharing the Spirit and that is what happened when we gathered with this group of dancing disciples.

Each time I have worked with these men, I have been amazed at their openness and willingness to move. I have marveled at the irony that these men had more personal freedom to express themselves and their faith in Jesus Christ than most Christians who are not imprisoned physically. One of the dances we did told the story of Pentecost, the story of a group of disciples gathered in an upper room when the power of the Spirit came upon them in wind and fire and they were able to express themselves in a language that all could understand. Two thousand years later, in the four walls of a Prison chapel, we could feel that same Spirit, empowering these believers to profess their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior but not in word,

but in movement, in hands joining, in arms stretching, in feet moving with the rhythm of the spirit.

I know nothing of the lives of these men who are in prison, some for crimes for which they have received life sentences. Part of me would like to know. Part of me wonders what did you do that brought you to this place? But really I don't need to know. Because in Christ Jesus the past does not matter. It didn't matter for Peter, James or John, or Mary Magdalene or any of those first disciples. In Christ all things are made new. The Spirit sent at Pentecost speaks of a present and a future. No matter what you have done, you are made new in Jesus Christ> And maybe that is what gives these men the power to dance so freely and celebrate in Jesus' name.

Before leaving, Sr Ann, showed me a mural that had been painted by one of the members of the dance group. It was truly amazing. This mural which was almost the length of the sanctuary was painted in multi-colors. What it portrays is hundreds of people of many races and backgrounds. Faces of all colors and hues. The artist uses the faces of the people in this prison and people from his life to create this image of the amazing mass of humanity, the beauty of God's creation in humankind. What an image for Pentecost, where people from so many nations hear and understand the good news of Jesus in their own language.

As a people of God we are not meant for solitary confinement. We are not meant to be alone. We are meant to be one in Jesus Christ. Like my friend Moses, we are called to walk on the Holy Ground of this beautiful, spirit-filled world. And we are meant to walk with each other.