

"Bursting Into Bloom"
Edited transcript of a sermon delivered at the
San Francisco Swedenborgian Church by Rev. Rachel Rivers
May 19, 2002 Pentecost

Scripture Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-6;14 & Acts 2:1-12

There's a Christian legend that in mid-winter St. Francis called out to an almond tree and said, "Speak to me of God!" And the almond tree burst into bloom. It came alive. So did the early apostles of Jesus come alive on that first Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on each one of them. These people, who were feeling so timid, so afraid, so lost, so leaderless, burst into being. They came to life as individuals and they came to life as a community: the Christian church was born.

The apostles became so full of Spirit, so full of divine power, that they couldn't keep quiet. They went out into the world preaching and teaching the Good News of love, understanding, and compassion. The establishment told them, "Shhhh! Keep quiet!" And they said, "We can't! We have seen and we have heard!" And they went on preaching and teaching and healing, even though it meant, for some of them, their death.

What is that Holy Spirit that inspired them and infused them, that brought them new life? Swedenborg writes a great deal about the Holy Spirit and in his book, *True Christian Religion*, he devotes the whole third chapter, over 60 pages, to the Holy Spirit. Thich Nhat Hanh, in his book, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, also devotes a whole chapter to the Holy Spirit. Emanuel Swedenborg and Thich Nhat Hanh are both saying the same thing in their own different ways.

Swedenborg says, first of all, that the Holy Spirit is not separate from God. The Holy Spirit is one with God. The Holy Spirit is divine energy, it's divine power, it's what comes forth from God. Swedenborg compared the Trinity to a person, with God the Father as the soul, God the Son as the body, and God the Holy Spirit as the activity, the power, the energy that comes forth from that body. Holy Spirit is another name for God.

Swedenborg also tells us that apart from God, we are nothing. What this means is there isn't any life apart from God. God is life itself, God is energy itself, so without God we don't have any energy. In fact, we are like dry bones. He says the story in Ezekiel about dry bones is about an unregenerate person, a person without life, a person with no divine spark. Swedenborg says every spark, every bit of energy, comes from the Divine, and that we human beings are the recipients of that divine energy and that divine spark. That's what animates our spirit, animates our soul. The Holy Spirit is always trying to pour into us, like a gentle rain. And there are times when we are more or less receptive. The more receptive to the Holy Spirit we are, the more alive we are.

Thich Nhat Hanh talks about the Holy Spirit in the same way that he talks about the Buddhist concept of mindfulness. He says it's the same energy: it's an energy of divine presence. It's an energy that embodies understanding and compassion. He says that so often we are either

worrying about the future or in pain about the past. It is when we are mindful and present to what's happening in this moment, right now, that we are open to the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are so used to thinking of ourselves as separate, independent beings, and we're so used to thinking of God as someone different than us. But the truth is, what is alive in us is God. And when we remember that, we can open ourselves to a divine power and a divine source that can re-enliven and re-energize our dry bones.

I have a story to share with you—yet another story about my scuba diving. You may remember how I told you about my training in Monterey Bay. The water was cold enough that we had to wear a very thick wet suit, and heavy equipment too, and 30 pounds of lead in order to be able to sink. We had to carry all our equipment a long distance down to the water. After all this effort I was pretty tired before we even fought the surf to get out into the deep water. By the time we had done the whole ordeal once and we were back down by the ocean after a brief rest to do it all over again, I was so exhausted that I did not think I could fight the surf one more time. I told the instructor, "I think I'll sit this one out." He said, "If you don't go in, none of us will go in." Which meant that none of us would get scuba-certified. It was the thought of holding the other six trainees back that pushed me beyond what felt like the end of my endurance and I went back in the water.

Sometimes we can do for others what we don't think we can do for our self. We become more capable by calling on a power greater than our self. It is the power of God—the energy of the Holy Spirit.

After that second plunge into the ocean I truly dragged myself back up on the shore, carried all the heavy equipment back to our base camp, and collapsed on the grass. I felt more tired than I could ever remember feeling. I was so glad to not have to do anything that I just lay there. I figured that I'd rest for 5 or 10 minutes and then I'd be rejuvenated. But I wasn't rejuvenated. The longer I lay there, the more tired I became. And then the world started to kind of spin. I started to get frightened and wondered why I wasn't feeling any better. Fears started running through my head, for example, that I had decompression sickness. Wait a minute, we didn't go down deep enough for decompression sickness. What could be the matter? I couldn't figure it out. And then finally this little voice in my head said: "I'm hungry." Food! I need food! What I'm feeling is a result of low blood sugar! I ate a banana, and within 10 minutes I was fine. No matter how long I had just rested, I wasn't going to get better. I needed sustenance, I needed energy.

My need for food that day was like our need of the Holy Spirit. Without it we are like a limp rag doll. The Holy Spirit nourishes and sustains us. It gives us life. The same spirit that was so present to the first followers of Jesus is just as present to each and every one of us right this moment, right now.

Let us pray: Dear God, we thank you for the gift of life. We thank you for your Divine Spirit that infuses our spirit—that fills us with love and understanding, with creativity, with enthusiasm and compassion. Help us to live lives overflowing with your Divine Spirit. Help us all to burst into bloom. Amen.

