

## **Day of Pentecost: “Thin Places” by Kathleen Lifsey**

**Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104: 24-34, 35b; Romans 8:22-27**

### **INTRODUCTION: TED LODER STORY**

The late Ted Loder was a Methodist minister, known for his artistic political activism and passion for social justice; wrote the most beautiful, what I call, prayer poems; and authored several books. One is entitled *The Haunt of Grace*, where he gives “responses” or tries to explain and expound upon “the Mystery of God’s Presence.” I want to begin with one of his stories and explanations this morning to get us started. It comes from the chapter, “Bent Fingers.”

“Nancy was a friend, a young mother, suddenly stricken with an incurable disease. She had only a few months to live when she told me this remarkable story. She told it with a smile watered by tears. ‘When I was growing up, ...I adored my grandmother. Her name was Anna, and she lived on a farm not too far from town. I loved to visit her as often as I could. When I was in seventh grade, Grandma Anna died. I was totally heart-broken and couldn’t stop crying for days.

“At Grandma Anna’s funeral, when no one was looking, I put a letter in her coffin. I asked her to show me a sign that she was still around and that God was real. I desperately needed comfort.

“Over the years I thought I noticed some signs of Grandma Anna’s presence from time to time, but I wasn’t sure, so mostly I still felt sort of vaguely forlorn. Until I was pregnant with my second child. From its conception, I was just sure the baby would be a girl. The only name I even considered for the baby was Anna. At a baby shower they asked me what we’d name it if it was a boy, and I blurted out, ‘Anna.’ Of course, they all laughed at me.

“The baby came two weeks late, which meant it was born on Grandma Anna’s birthday. I was certain this wasn’t coincidence. And it was a girl, Anna. The first thing I noticed when they handed her to me was that her fingers were bent in a certain distinctive way. They were bent just like my Grandma Anna’s fingers had been bent, an obvious, funny little quirk no one else in the family had. The family used to joke about Grandma Anna’s fingers, so when little Anna turned up with those same fingers, I cried for joy. It was such a powerful, comforting sign. I knew little Anna’s bent fingers were an answer to the letter I’d put in Grandma Anna’s coffin.’

“It’s an intriguing story, isn’t it? How are we to understand it? Could it be that baby Anna’s bent fingers were actually a sign of Grandma Anna’s presence? Were they a way God touched and comforted the granddaughter who had asked for such a sign... or is the story about an illusion? Were little Anna’s bent fingers just a coincidence, a trait explained by genetics... or were they a clue to something more?

Peter Gomes, preached to Harvard University at the Memorial Church, writes, ‘There is in Celtic mythology the notion of ‘thin places’ in the universe, where the visible and invisible world come into their closest proximity.’ Leave it to the Irish to come up with such a lovely, poetic, powerful image: thin places where the eternal world rubs close to the world of time. The Irish monks believe it is at such frontiers that God and human being are most intimately present to each other. I love the image. All of us can name some thin places we’ve experienced....

“Are there truly thin places where God touches us with comfort and with its companion, hope?

Jesus told two little parables about thin places [in Matthew, chapter 13]:

*The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it is grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and make nests in its branches.*

Then this:

*The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.*

Would it be too great a stretch to add this parable of like kind?

*The kingdom of God is like a little girl who puts a letter in her grandmother’s coffin and years later gives birth to a baby with bent fingers as a reply.*

However you read them, Jesus’ parables touch on the thin places where two worlds, two dimensions, rub together. The first, and simpler of the two dimensions, is the human side. When we hear these parables, it is easy to focus on the mustard seed and the yeast and overlook the rest of it. Yet it is critical to remember it was a man and a woman who did the small acts of planting the seed and putting the yeast in the flour....

[And then] we come to the other side of the parables and of the thin places—God’s side. It is by far the most crucial side. Think of it this way. Both the man and the woman in the parables ‘took’ something given and did something with it: the man with the mustard seed, the woman with the yeast. God gave it and God was in it. They simply took what was given, lived it, and something like miracles happened” (Loder 56-58, 63).

### **THIN PLACES & PENTECOST**

So why am I talking about thin places on Pentecost? First of all, what is Pentecost and why is it celebrated today? “With the ascension of Jesus, the gathering of believers in Jerusalem, and the identification of an apostle to replace Judas”—remember, we read that text last week?—“the stage is now set for the outpouring of the Spirit, an event that has been promised again and again but one that still comes with startling force.... Pentecost serves largely to introduce the Spirit’s work” (Gaventa, 73). “...for Luke [the author of Acts], the giving of the Holy Spirit secures the promise that ‘the Lord’s great and glorious day’ will indeed come” (Gaventa, 77).

A very basic summary: God creates the world and man; man screws it up, tries to make it right; repeat about a million times more; God continues faithfully in relationship with us; we still can’t get it quite right; God sends Jesus; we still can’t get it right so Jesus dies; then we get the Holy Spirit: the Advocate, the Comforter, the Guide, the Intercessor, the Paraclete. I told you: a very basic summary of the events up until now. The gift of the holy spirit, giving birth to a new church with a new opportunity, is a perfect example of where two worlds rub together—we, on the human side, and God’s side. God gave us the Holy Spirit and God was in it. God is in it. Now, what are we going to do with it?

### **ROMANS**

I believe Paul even has an element of thin places within the Romans text we read as well. Commentator Tom Wright explains it by saying, “We groan and sigh, if we know what we are about, as we experience the tension between the glorious promise and the present reality. This tension is encapsulated in the fact that the spirit is already at work within us, but has not yet completed the task of our full renewal” (Wright, 152). And taking it one step further, Wright says that “At the centre of this remarkable passage is one of [Paul’s] most vivid images of hope: that of birth-pangs” (Wright, 153). Would you consider child birth to be a thin place? I do. Especially after witnessing my niece’s birth. It’s not all sunshine, rainbows, and smiles. Before, during, or after. But it is miraculous to create life, to nurture a new life, to witness the growing of life before your very eyes, isn’t it?

“Paul has just been speaking of the glory of adoption into the family of God [in the beginning of the 8th chapter?]; and then, after the thought of the glory, he comes back to the troubled state of this present world. Here he draws a

great picture. He speaks with a poet’s vision. He sees creation itself, the created world, all nature waiting for the glory that shall be” (Barclay, 113).

You see, “Jewish thought divided time into two sections—there was this present age and the age which is to come. This present age was wholly bad, subject to sin, and death and decay. Some day there would come The Day of the Lord. That would be a day of judgment and a day when the world would be shaken to its foundations and shattered; but out of it there would come a new world” (Barclay, 113) They were waiting for a thin place where the “ephemeral and the eternal” world collide (Rev Gail). And we still are today, aren’t we?

### ***THIN PLACES***

But we get glimpses of it, tastes of it, hints of it every now and then. Of thin places. Places we can’t quite explain in words, but we feel it in our spirits, feel it to our cores. Places that might not be places at all, but moments, experiences. Or maybe they are people—I dare not label them “thin people” though—people that make you feel closer to God, that calm you with their presence, warm you with their smile.

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest, author, and teacher, claims that ‘Thin places are transparent places or moments, set apart by the quality of the sunlight in them, or the shadows, or the silence, or the sounds—see how many variations there are? What they have in common is their luminosity, the way they light an opening between this world and another... It works to make you more aware of the thin veil between apparent reality and deeper reality. It works to pull aside the veil for just a moment, so you can see through. Sometimes I know I’m in a thin place because it feels like the floor just dropped two or three levels beneath my feet and set me down in a deeper place. They can open up just about anywhere... But thin places aren’t always lovely places, and they’re now always outdoors. Hospital rooms can be thin places. So can emergency rooms and jail cells. A thin place is any place that drops you down to where you know you’re in the presence of the Really Real—the Most Real—God, if you insist.’” Amen, sister.

“Thin Places confuse our senses. We suddenly see the world in a different light. Our perceptions change. With breathless wonder we encounter the Divine and it changes us. For people who hold to a faith, Thin Places are those places where we feel most strongly connected to God’s presence” (Conner).

And “Perhaps a Thin Place can best be identified through how it affects us, changes us, strips us, and transforms us. We can’t really plan day trips to Thin Places. Rather, it seems, that Thin Places find us. Those mindful moments when suddenly we catch a glimpse of heaven and earth unencumbered” (Conner). A mindful moment where we catch a glimpse of heaven and earth simultaneously.

I think of being on top of the Ngong mountains in Nairobi. I think of the years I spent with Sally watching her grow and wonder. I think of the weeks I spent at my grandparents’ in the summer getting spoiled beyond belief. I think of the hospital rooms I’ve frequented more often than I thought I ever would. I think of the walks I’ve taken with my dad. I think of the beautiful sunrise over the ocean with my sand in the toes. I think of the chapel at the mission hospital in Embangweni full of chants and dances. I think of motion of a boat traveling through wake. I think of the youth building forts in the middle of the night at a summer conference instead of sleeping. I think of the children that ask me hard questions like, “Why isn’t Jesus still here?”

So I ask you: what are your thin places? Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Think. Recall. Enter that sacred space again in your mind. What brings you here? Who brings you here? When was the last time you were here?

### ***REFLECTIONS***

Coming back around to Ted Loder’s story and reflection with Nancy and her Annas, he goes on to say that “Faith, or better yet, trust, is the bridge at the thin place. That’s why these two parables of Jesus are parables of trust, of

work in our lives, invisibly at work, like a seed growing in the darkness, like yeast rising in the load. The work of faith is to identify and make sense of the thin places. That means never losing heart. It means to keep taking, and planting, and mixing in faith. It is no accident that small acts affect lives far beyond our view, our power, our lifetime. That’s true because God us faithful. God is at work in the invisible world that rubs against, and breaks through, into this visible one, while remaining invisible to us” (Loder, 63).

“What I am trying to say is that God—the kingdom of the invisible world rubbing against this one—has room enough for angry people, people who grieve and cry, frightened people, people who doubt and betray, are guilty of all sorts of sin, who struggle, get sick and die, yet do wonderful, beautiful, incredible things. People like us. God holds us, like the earth holds a seed, breaks us open, raises us like life from a seed, like yeast raises the mess of flour and makes bread of it, of us. That is what God’s grace, God’s mercy, God’s power and purposes are about. At the thin places we are—at the thin places we seek and find and share—God is there, invisibly, invincibly working” (Loder, 64).

Do you think the events in Jerusalem with the crowd gathered for the festival that were then abruptly and—what seems to me—a bit chaotically given the gift of the Holy Spirit looked back on this moment and labeled it a thin place for them? A moment where God was breaking through. Where the “ephemeral and eternal” worlds coexist, collide, and create a new sense of life?

God gave us the Holy Spirit and God was in it. God is in it. Now, what are we going to do with it?

### ***BEING THE CHURCH***

We have spent the last six weeks talking about BEING the church. The church that abides and grows in God. The church that knows—truly KNOWS—God. The church that loves God, serves God, and worships God. When we invest ourselves in these tasks, in becoming these people individually and collectively that abide and grow in God, that know, love, serve, and worship God, not only are we truly being the church, I believe we will experience more of our own thin places that give us chills and thrills AND I believe we will be able to share in those experiences with others all around us—sharing the love of God, the Good News of the gospel, and the peace that surpasses all understanding. Isn’t that what God wants? Isn’t that what life together in the church is about? We can take all of what God has given freely to us, especially for the Holy Spirit that connects us between the two worlds, binds us together in the Body of Christ, and empowers us to be our own image of God reflected to the world. We can give thanks and praise that God is in the mix of it all. And then *do* something with it. Actually do something! Abide and grow in God, know God, love God, serve God, worship God. “That is what life together in the church is about, or should be, as well as our mission as a church [should be] about. That is what each of us is about as we pray, sing, reach out, touch, include, let ourselves be included, risk giving the gift God made us” (Loder, 62-63).

Friends, God gave us the Holy Spirit. God was in it. God is in it. God is within us; we have the Holy Spirit. Now what are we going to do with it?