

## ***“Birthday stories”***

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I’m indebted to the Rev. Dawn Hutchings and Peter Rollins for the ideas they have provided for this reflection.

We have just celebrated Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. Birthday celebrations lend themselves to the telling of stories. So, we begin with a parable by the radical theologian Peter Rollins. So, sit back and try to imagine that you live not at the beginning of the 21st century but at the middle of the 21st century; say about 2050. The world has changed quite a bit. “It seems that in the future laws will be passed declaring that all those who follow the teachings of Jesus are subversive. Churches have been banned and to be a follower of Jesus is illegal. You have just been accused of being a believer. You’ve been arrested and dragged before a court. You have been under clandestine surveillance for some time now, and so the prosecution has been able to build up quite a case against you. They begin the trial by offering the judge dozens of photographs that show you attending underground church meetings, speaking at religious events, and participating in various prayer and worship services. After this, they present a selection of items that have been confiscated from your home: religious books that you own, worship CDs, and other Christian artefacts. Then they step up the pace by displaying many of the poems, pieces of prose, and journal entries that you had lovingly written concerning your faith. Finally, in closing, the prosecution offers your Bible to the judge. This is a well-worn book with scribbles, notes, drawings, and underlining throughout, evidence, if it were needed, that you had read and reread this sacred text many times. Throughout the case you have been sitting silently in fear and trembling. You know deep in your heart that with the large body of evidence that has been amassed by the prosecution you face the possibility of a long imprisonment or even execution. At various times throughout the proceedings you have lost all the confidence and have been on the verge of standing up and denying

Christ. But while this thought has plagued your mind throughout the trial, you resist the temptation and remain focused.

Once the prosecution has finished presenting their case the judge proceeds to ask if you have anything to add, but you remain silent and resolute, terrified that if you open your mouth, even for a moment, you might deny the charges made against you. Like Christ you remain silent before your accusers. In response you are led outside to wait as the judge ponders your case. The hours pass slowly as you sit under guard in the foyer waiting to be summoned back. Eventually a young man in uniform appears and leads you into the courtroom so that you may hear the verdict and receive word of your punishment. Once you have been seated in the dock the judge, a harsh and unyielding man, enters the room, stands before you, looks deep into your eyes and begins to speak. "On the charges that have been brought forward I find the accused not guilty."

"Not guilty?" your heart freezes. Then, in a split second, the fear and terror that had moments before threatened to strip your resolve are swallowed up by confusion and rage. Despite the surroundings, you stand defiantly before the judge and demand that he give an account concerning why you are innocent of the charges in light of the evidence. "What evidence?" asks the judge in shock.

"What about the poems and prose that I wrote?" you ask. "They simply show that you think of yourself as a poet, nothing more." "But what about the services I spoke at, the times I wept in church and the long, sleepless nights of prayer?" "Evidence that you are a good speaker and an actor, nothing more," replied the judge. "It is obvious that you deluded those around you, and perhaps at times you even deluded yourself, but this foolishness is not enough to convict you in a court of law." "But this is madness!" you shout. "It would seem that no evidence would convince you!" "Not so," replies the judge as if informing you of a great long-forgotten secret. "The court is indifferent toward your Bible reading and church attendance; it has

no concern for worship with words and a pen. Continue to develop your theology, and use it to paint pictures of love. We have no interest in such armchair artists who spend their time creating images of a better world. We exist only for those who would lay down that brush, and their life, in a Christlike endeavour to create a better world. So, until you live as Christ and Christ's followers did, until you challenge this system and become a thorn in our side, until you die to yourself and offer your body to the flames, until then, my friend, you are no enemy of ours."

Rollins insists that this parable is true right here and right now. We don't have to imagine a world where Christianity is illegal for this parable to be true. Rollins insists that: "If you or I were really to take the teachings of Jesus seriously, would we not sooner or later, find ourselves being dragged before the authorities? If we were really to live a life that reflected the subversive and radical message of love that gives a voice to the voiceless and a place to those who are displaced, if we were really to stand up against systemic oppression perpetrated by those in power, then would we not find ourselves on the wrong side of the lawmakers?"

We have just celebrated the birthday of the church and we would do well to remember the stories our ancestors wove together about what it was like back in the beginning. Sure, it was like they were on fire! There they were huddled together in fear. Afraid to go outside, in case the authorities might spot them. Tormented by their grief. Afraid the dream might be over. Those were the days. It wasn't like it is now. Back then, back when you could actually see the flames dashing in and out and all around the church, back then followers of Jesus didn't embody their faith by simply expressing acceptance of a belief system that pointed to Jesus. No back then the church was on fire, and the followers of Jesus embodied their faith in the sacrifice of loving; love, the love that Jesus poured out his life teaching us, love set them on fire and changed the world.

It's all a bit tame these days. These days not even the followers of Jesus expect that kind of passion. It's as if the church is suffering from some sort of heartburn and the followers of Jesus have lost their appetite for the hot stuff that inflames a person's insides. These days you'd be hard pressed to pick out a follower of Jesus from the any of the rest of them. The followers of Jesus have blended in; they've found a way to live just like the rest of them. They've taken all that Jesus taught them, and watered it down so as you'd hardly recognize it's potential to change the world. Oh, sure, every once in a while, a fire breaks out, and people begin to get excited about what Jesus really had to say, but then just as quickly Monday rolls around and people are back at it. Back at clawing and scratching for survival in this world that they've chosen over the possibility of something more.

The church has settled into the culture, and the flames have died down and once again we are huddling together behind closed doors. Afraid. Only this time we afraid of the flames. We're afraid of the whole thing catching fire. We afraid that if we let ourselves go, if we begin to take seriously what Jesus was trying to teach us, if we begin to fan the flames with our questions, we run the risk of burning the whole place down. So, we've assigned all sorts of sentries to stand guard, so that the flames are stamped out before they can ignite the people. We've established creeds, and liturgies and formed committees and we think we're doing a good job of containing the Spirit. So, it's safe for people to come to church. They know that if they're lucky all they'll get from church is a warm glow. Nobody is going to get burnt. Not if they just follow the rules. And it's working. These days the powers that be don't give us a second thought unless they need to borrow some of the tools we've developed to put out the fires.

These days if a fire should break out, if people should begin to become inflamed by something Jesus said, and demand justice or peace, well the powers that be just borrow a few extinguishers from

the church and before too long people are too worried about their stuff or what's going to happen to them when they die, to give a second thought for their neighbours. People are pretty secure in the notion that the fires have gone out. Nobody worries too much about the dangers of those old passions being ignited. It's not like it was back then. We've pretty much domesticated the Spirit and she's become pretty much a house pet. She doesn't get out very much anymore. Except, every once in a while, when She manages to fan the flames a little. It usually begins with something as innocuous as a question. Trouble is that one question usually leads to another and before you know it people are talking about what Jesus actually said and then things get out of control and before you know it, the place is on fire again.

Those flames are powerful. Those flames are dangerous. Those flames could turn the whole world on its head. Why if we're not careful passion might just inflame the world, and people will be committing all sorts of outrageous acts of love. Nobody will be able to control it and before you know it that same Spirit that breathed in Jesus will be breathing in all of us. It will be as if we are on fire; on fire with the love of God for the people of God!

I'm telling you that if we were to live a life that reflected the subversive and radical message of love that gives voice to the voiceless and a place to those who are displaced, if we were really to stand up against systemic oppression perpetrated by those in power, then we would indeed find ourselves on the wrong side of the lawmakers. Perhaps, the time has come to fan the flames with passion; the kind of passion that Jesus had – passion for life. Life that is bigger than ourselves. Life that is full and abundant not just for us but for our neighbours as well. Perhaps the time has come to once again express our faith, not with the acceptance of a belief system, but with reckless acts of loving-kindness.

Now that's the kind of fire that could change the world. Are you prepared to fan those flames? Or are you afraid of the powers that be? Would you rather stay locked away in here where its safe? Or are your questions burning a hole in your carefully held beliefs? Are you tired of playing it safe? Are you ready to follow Jesus out there into the world? Are you ready to fan the flames with your passion? Are you ready to have the powers that be sit up and take notice? Are you ready to commit outrageous acts of loving-kindness? I can hardly wait to see those flames dancing all about! It will be as if we are on fire!