

## Our Helicopter God?

Matthew 8:14-17 & Luke 4:38-41 (Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law.)

Acts 2: 1-13 (Pentecost Event)

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Many of us are dressed in red, orange, or yellow. Our children came in dancing and waving red spirals. Our sanctuary banners are now red. What's all this commotion about? We're celebrating Pentecost which we celebrate every year, 50 days after Easter. This event is vividly described in the *Book of Acts* with descriptions of the *Spirit of God* swooping into the crowd in an unmistakable way, making a dramatic impression on all those who were gathered there to worship. The biblical account does not say that the *Holy Spirit* is wind or fire, but that the *Spirit* was so powerful in its effect on those gathered that it was as if there was the sound of wind or the rush of fire. This in-breaking of the *Divine* into human activity was so dramatic; it could only be described with special effects. The whole community *was inspired!* God's Risen Christ was on earth; they would go forth and let it be known...in all languages...to all lands...Not only that, they were together in this understanding--across all language barriers. Diverse peoples speaking many languages were so filled with love they were of one accord. We here dressed in red seek today that same sense of being so filled with *Love* that we feel of one accord with all humanity!

We Methodists incorporate this image of the *Holy Spirit* as fire into our denominational symbol--tongues of fire beside the cross. Even though we associate fire and tongues of fire with the transforming events that happened to the community of Jesus- followers which basically began the Christian church, the *Dove* is the symbol most frequent used for the *Holy Spirit*, largely because when Jesus was baptized and vividly experienced the blessing of the *Holy Spirit*, people described the experience as if a dove swooped down and touched or blessed him.

Even today, we occasionally wistfully dream of flying freely among the winds . . . like a bird. The dove is also a symbol of peace. Peace--one of Jesus' profoundest hopes for the human race.

**Wind** is yet another symbol of the Spirit, since the Hebrew word for "spirit" means "wind" or "breath."

**Doves, fire, wind** are ways to say that we experience the Holy as powerfully present and nearby.

What about "*Helicopter*" as a symbol of the *Holy Spirit*? I think I need to give some background info on this before I ask for your opinion on the matter.

When our children were 3 1/2 or 4 years old they moved from half day preschool to full day preschool, which meant that they carried their lunch to school—or, rather, we drove them to school, along with their lunch. One day we brought our daughter to school, and she did not have her lunch, so I dashed home to get it, and then brought it back to her.

The woman who was like the "principal" of the school—I think she was called the Director—greeted me at the front door of the school, as I arrived with the forgotten lunch

in my hand, and she said to me, “So, will you be bringing your daughter her lunch if she forgets it when she is in college?”

I was taken aback. College? That sounded like a long time off to me. This was a Montessori preschool, and the philosophy, which I tend to like, is that people need to be responsible for themselves. The Director pointed out that if Alexandra did not have any lunch *that day*, she would tend to remember her lunch in the future. True, I thought, as I ignored the Director and walked to Alexandra’s classroom to hand her the lunch, with a smile.

I’m not sure what this Director would have labeled a parent who brought their son or daughter their lunch in college. This event happened 23 years ago. Today there *is* a name for that kind of parent—**Helicopter Parent**. I’m not making this up. There’s a book entitled *Helicopter Parents* that is used in “effective parenting” classes. Helicopter parents hover, like helicopters, closely overhead, watching out for their children—whether or not the children need them.

It’s a pejorative term for parents; that is, it suggests that the parents are over-protective or over-controlling of their children, especially their children’s education. I guess staffs at colleges use this pejorative term to refer to parents who call the colleges repeatedly to inquire about their children.

When I heard that term for parents, given my propensity to think about ways of imagining *God*, I immediately wondered whether considering *God* as a *Helicopter God* would be positive or pejorative. That is, is it positive or not to consider *God* as hovering over us...sometimes creating a lot of wind around a circumstance to get our attention! Is it positive or pejorative to consider *God* prompting us, somehow providing us with what we need, even with what we might have forgotten?

Whether it is positive or pejorative to consider *God* as hovering over us, caring for our every need, is it **true**? Theologically-- **Is God or the Holy Spirit like a Helicopter Parent?**

Pentecost is a unique opportunity to focus upon the power of the Spirit--whether dove-like, fire-like, wind-like, or helicopter-like, entering our lives in communal, even family-sized ways.

I am fascinated with the family story we read today from all three Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus healed a Mother-in-law, Peter’s Mother-in-law, to be precise.

This story originated with the Gospel of Mark. In *Mark’s* account, Jesus goes to the house, and at his initiative, heals Peter’s wife’s mother. Right after her healing, this woman gets up, welcomes her guests, and prepares a meal for them! In the Gospel of Luke, the event is reported quite similarly. Jesus comes dashing in from the synagogue, heals the woman, and then she herself gets up and starts serving everyone. Matthew shortens this story, placing his emphasis upon Jesus as taking all the initiative. Yet, again in Matthew’s account, the healed woman gets up and starts serving all of them.

I have to call this energetic woman “the healed woman” or “Peter’s mother-in-law” because she is not given a name in any of the three renditions of the event.

This is obviously a popular biblical story--it made it into 3 of the 4 gospels. However, I would find this story more satisfying if the people around Peter’s unnamed mother-in-law got up and served *her* at least for a day or two, while she recuperates. One commentator on Luke points out that the emphasis upon *her* service may be to point out

that in gratitude to Jesus, she serves—and this is what we should do, too—in gratitude for to Jesus, we should serve.

Whether or not this story presents this particular *family system* as a good role model of care for us, the story is a wonderful example of *Jesus* being what we could call a *Helicopter Rabbi*. Jesus was a *Helicopter Healer*. He swooped in to try to help. I've never heard or seen helicopters in Redlands, hovering with search lights over our neighborhoods, checking for any potential crisis. However, both in Dayton Ohio and in Tustin, in Orange County, we frequently saw and heard helicopters hovering over our neighborhoods with huge searchlights peeking into all street corners looking for any problem to deal with. Rex Britt told me yesterday that in Redlands we are being seen, for we have an airplane that flies above us which is more effective and less obvious.

It is hard for us sometimes to back up in our minds to remember what people even one century ago didn't know, let alone what they did not know 20 centuries ago! Peter, Jesus, Matthew, Mark, Luke, even the unnamed Mother-in-Law, did not know much about the causes of illness. They used to think that fevers were a kind of possession by some other power. So, Jesus is described as “releasing” the fever. He “releases” the fever in the same way that he proclaimed that people were “released” from all kinds of unjust situations.

We might call Jesus a *Helicopter Releaser*, for he was often drawn in for a rapid response when people were held down, held back, not only by illnesses but also by unfair and unjust ways of ordering society.

Let's look at the powerful community event we call Pentecost and the family healing event together. In both, there is a Spirit of Love, a Spirit of Urgency, and a Spirit of Release from bondage that swoops down and into the lives of gathered people—a family in one case, a worshipping crowd, in the other. Where there was something wrong, something amiss, something not as good as it could be, the *Spirit of the Living Rabbi* or the *Spirit of the Risen Christ* made a lot of noise and was right there, present to make a difference in their lives!

I am not sure that the Director of the Dayton preschool would agree, but I think it's not so bad to hover around, with reasonable care, to serve, just as Jesus does. In fact, sometimes I feel that our congregation does just that kind of hovering for each other and others in our community. Jesus rushed to people *himself* much of the time; he does not seem to have delegated his job to others. Nor did he tell others they needed always to solve their own problems. I bet he would not have fretted if he were teased, called a *Helicopter Healer*. I can imagine him saying, “When there is a need, what's wrong with helping?”

It's a fine line, though. When do we help? When is *doing for* others doing too much? This question is obvious in the strangeness of the story of the woman who jumps up after being healed to serve all the family a meal. For humans, our dilemma is one of relationships—how to balance being responsive to others with taking care of ourselves? How do we live in community with mutuality? We humans reach many limits. There are limits to what we *should* do, not to intrude in the lives of others, and what we *can* do.

In the parenting approach that talks of Helicopter Parents in a pejorative manner, a distinction is made between parents who have a lot of zeal as they attend to their children and parents who cross the line and move into unethical behavior, such as writing their children's college admission essays for their children. Those parents who have gone

too far are called “Black Hawk” Helicopters because Black Hawks are *very powerful military* helicopters.

What about that question we tabled earlier: **Is God truly like a Helicopter Parent, prompting and providing for us what we need?**

I think *God or the Holy Spirit is in a sense Our Helicopter God*, in that we trust that +God does zoom into all sorts of circumstances—to help.

God *is* there for us, as a Helicopter, whether healing mother in laws or providing zeal for whole faith communities. Yet, I rather regret that God cannot be what the parenting folks would call a *Black Hawk Helicopter God*. It isn’t that God chooses not to; I think that with God’s persuasive power, God cannot cross the line of human freedom to bring all difficult situations into healing without human will and love being in-synch with God. Think about war in Afghanistan and Iraq.... renovation and survival in Haiti.... clean up and restoration of the Gulf Coast .... and other places where there are very difficult situations today. I believe God is hovering over all the people who are in the midst of these crises right now. However, clearly God is not physically in a helicopter able to drop peace doves or energy biscuits from the sky or big sponges to mop up oil, even for the very precious people in all these places. God needs human heads and hearts and hands. I do trust that *Our Helicopter God* keeps stirring up wind in the minds and hearts of the leaders of nations and business, working towards creative and compassionate solutions.

It is not good for parents to keep holding onto children. We have to let go—to trust them to live their lives--though we can always love. However, Hallelujah! God does and can keep holding onto all of God’s children, all the time. In fact, the fact that *God is a Helicopter God* that won’t let go may help human parents *to* let go!

Author Sandra Cisneros, in her book *Caramelo* describes a grandmother who calls her granddaughter “mija,” short for. That is, “mi hija,” or “my daughter,” in Spanish. This Grandmother gave comfort to Lala, saying something to her granddaughter that sure sounds like a theological statement to me, one that answers *yes* to our question about God on this Pentecost Sunday: “Mija, remember, when you’re most alone, God *is* nearby.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cisneros, Sandra, *Caramelo*. NY: Vintage Books, 2002, 119-120