

“I WILL POUR OUT MY SPIRIT”

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, May 31, 2015

Pentecost, Part II – 10:00 a.m.

First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from above there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “People of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”

May and June are busy birthday months in my immediate family. The birthday parade began with my brother Gordon's birthday on May 9 and ends with my birthday on June 25. Here, in chronological order, are the other participants in this birthday parade: my son Ethan. My wife Mary. My daughter Abbey. My granddaughter Isabelle. My daughter Julia.

When I celebrate the birthdays of my children, I like to remember their birth stories. Both Ethan and Abbey, for instance, were born on “dark and stormy nights” when we lived in the Berkshires in western Massachusetts.

Today, which I'm calling “Pentecost Sunday – Part II,” we are celebrating the first-century birthday of the Christian church, when the Holy Spirit was “poured out upon” Jesus' friends and followers, enabling them to speak about him in many languages.

In the New Testament there are two very different “birth stories” about the birthday of the Christian church. The gospel of John and the book of Acts portray the bestowing of the Holy Spirit on the followers of Jesus in significantly different ways.

You've already heard Luke's account of the coming of the Spirit in the reading from Acts, which is the second volume in Luke's “Good News of Jesus and His Followers.” Now listen to John's account (John 20:19-23):

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the [authorities], Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”
²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

In the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek, the word for “spirit” can also be translated as “wind” or “breath.” Playing with these three meanings, Barbara Brown Taylor calls the noisy Pentecost narrative from Acts the “birth story of a Violent Wind congregation.” She calls the quiet narrative from John the “birth story of a Gentle Breath congregation.”¹

“Members of Violent Wind congregations,” she writes, “count on the Spirit to guide them as they go out into the world in search of Holy Fire.” And how do Violent Wind congregations know when they have found this Holy Fire? “Because wherever the Spirit is, there is heat and light. Because people's lives are being changed around that fire and because they are so excited about what is happening to them that they sound positively sloshed—only it's not new wine they are drunk on but a new pouring of God's spirit, so generous that it cannot be contained by any human institution.”

Gentle Breath congregations, on the other hand, view themselves as “guardians of [the spirit of Jesus] through the ministry of [his] church....In these

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “God's Breath,” *Journal for Preachers* (January 1, 2003), 37-40. Accessed online on 06/03/2014 at <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=79a4835d-6043-4c41-a439-ebc53803a517%40sessionmgr4005&vid=2&hid=4206>.

congregations, it is every member's job to go out into the world, find those who don't know anything about the Spirit, and bring them back inside the church so that they can meet God in person." In a Gentle Breath congregation, people meet God in person through the care and compassion and hospitality and, yes, forgiveness, of one another.

Barbara Brown Taylor concludes that "If they are lucky, most churches get a dose of both [violent wind and gentle breath] before they are through, and while they may not know where the wind [or breath or spirit or holy fire] comes from or where it is going, they do know [who is to be thanked], which is why God gave the church to the world: not to possess the Spirit but to serve the Spirit, wherever in the world the Spirit may be found."

Yes, the birth stories of the Christian church are all about receiving, and sharing, the gift of the Holy Spirit, prophesied by Joel and promised by Jesus. In our particular Protestant and Congregational heritage, we are among those "Gentle Breath congregations" who offer welcome to other folks who choose to worship with us and rejoice with us and sing spiritual songs with us. We meet God in person as we experience care and compassion and love and welcome and forgiveness from one another. We don't ask of new members, for instance, that they give personal testimony of a profound experience of religious conversion. But we do ask of our new members that they covenant with us to seek the well-being both of the church and of the wider community.

In today's world, "Gentle Breath" congregations like ours are facing many obstacles and opportunities. We are anxious about our future: about declining membership, worship attendance, Sunday school attendance, financial support. We are moving into an uncertain season in the life of our church: which is not just our church, but God's church. In these days of anxiousness and uncertainty, we need to remember that the church is not only a human institution, it is also a divine creation.

The Rev. Richard Floyd is a member of the UCC Still Speaking Writers' Group. (Rick and my wife Mary and I were colleagues back in the 1990's, when we were serving churches in the Berkshires in western MA.) In a recent contribution to the UCC's Daily Devotional, Rick took as his text Ezekiel 37:4-5: "*Then God said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.'*" Commenting on these verses, Rick Floyd wrote:

"I was once asked why I wanted to get ordained since the church was dying. That was forty years ago. Two years ago my daughter was ordained, and someone asked *her* how she was going to deal with being a leader in a dying church. She answered, 'I don't believe that God will let the church die.'

"I don't either, because our God specializes in breathing life back into what seems lifeless, creating possibilities where there seem to be none.

"I recall the wonder I felt when I learned that the words for spirit, wind, and breath are all the same word in the Bible. It turns up everywhere. It's the wind that blew over the formless void at creation. It's the breath that reanimated

the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision. It's the Spirit that overcame the disciples at Pentecost and created the church.

"The church is not dead and we're not done, not by a long shot. Sure, things are changing and the future won't look like today. But God's wind is still blowing. God's breath is still breathing. God's Spirit is still empowering. 'I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live!'²

I close this morning with a beautiful blessing for us, during this season of new birth, of new breath entering us. It's a Pentecost blessing that comes from artist and theologian Jan Richardson.

Here's one thing
you must understand
about this blessing:
it is not
for you alone.
It is stubborn
about this;
do not even try
to lay hold of it
if you are by yourself,
thinking you can carry it
on your own. To bear this blessing,
you must first take yourself
to a place where everyone
does not look like you
or think like you,
a place where they do not
believe precisely as you believe,
where their thoughts
and ideas and gestures
are not exact echoes
of your own.
Bring your sorrow. Bring your grief.
Bring your fear. Bring your weariness,
your pain, your disgust at how broken
the world is, how fractured,
how fragmented
by its fighting, its wars,
its hungers, its penchant for power,
its ceaseless repetition
of the history it refuses
to rise above.

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http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_breathe_on_us_breath_of_god?utm_campaign=dd_may27_15&utm_medium=email&utm_source=unitedchurchofchrist

I will not tell you
this blessing will fix all that.
But in the place
where you have gathered,
wait.
Watch.
Listen.
Lay aside your inability
to be surprised,
your resistance to what you
do not understand.
See then whether this blessing
turns to flame on your tongue,
sets you to speaking
what you cannot fathom
or opens your ear
to a language
beyond your imagining
that comes as a knowing
in your bones
a clarity
in your heart
that tells you
this is the reason
we were made,
for this ache
that finally opens us,
for this struggle, this grace
that scorches us
toward one another
and into
the blazing day

³ Jan Richardson, "Pentecost: This Grace That Scorches Us," © Jan Richardson,
http://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/06/01/pentecost-this-grace-that-scorches-us/#.USB_QC98yWA. (Last
line, "of holy fire," added by Douglas Clark to link back to Barbara Brown Taylor quotation.)