



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“The Spirit which brings us together”

Acts 2:1-21 John 20:19-23

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May 8, 2016

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Welcome to the feast of Pentecost, our yearly celebration of the Spirit of God powerfully present, in which we live, which gives us life. This is the day which marks the outpouring of the Spirit upon the infant church, it's quickening (as they say in the book of common prayer), it's enlivening, empowering- it's shift from "we might just survive this" to "this is life!" But for many of us this whole Pentecost thing, and the talk of holy wind and fire is more bewildering than enlightening. If I were to claim to be a pentecostal Christian, first of all you likely never would have called me here in the first place, and secondly, you wouldn't be any the wiser about my brand of faith. Spirit talk is, by nature, ethereal. After all, it is Spirit, right? Frederick Beuchner says that the word "spirit" denotes something "pale and shapeless, like an unmade bed." We stayed United Church folk get a little wiggly when somebody starts talking about having the pentecostal Spirit.

But if the language of Spirit is odd to us, we had better get over it, because these days, there is a huge hunger for a clear and well-grounded spiritual faith. If the church wants to engage this hunger in newcomers or searchers, Spirit talk is one place they can connect. In our culture right now there is a huge and often very justified suspicion of organized religion but spirituality is hot. The buzz phrase is "spiritual but not religious." Unfortunately the word "spiritual" can be used to mean almost anything. However, the phrase speaks to a yearning in many of us for experiences of the spirit, for a re-awakening of that part of ourselves we call spirit and of an understanding of that part of this crazy journey of life that is... well... spiritual.

Now, often professed Christians have claimed an experience of the Spirit, it comes across to me as a kind of mob emotionalism like that of the TV evangelists, and it feels very manipulative to me. And if that's the Spirit, I'm not really interested. Neither, I think, are the "spiritual but not religious. Still other times, events happen, and people say, "I felt the presence of the spirit," and yet at the very same time another person there experienced the very opposite. At the 1988 General Council in which the church decided that sexual orientation should, in and of itself, be no impediment to full membership in the church some people named that as an experience of the Spirit of God moving. For others it offended their sense of what the spirit of God is about. So how can you tell; how do you know?

It is a powerful question- a difficult question. It is the very question that got John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, in trouble with his then-Anglican church- accused of "enthusiasm", or emotionalism. Well Wesley just called it the Spirit at work.

The Holy Spirit. The English word "spirit" comes from "spirare" which means "to breathe", and the biblical word for spirit means either breath or wind. In ordinary conversation I think we know exactly what spirit means. A spirited horse is strong, and wild and exhilarating and dangerous. A free spirit is a person who is unconfined by convention or all the "shoulds" that many of us live by. And when we discover something, and the scales fall from our eyes and we say, Aha!!!, we say we were inspired. The Spirit is in us.

If your energy and drive is low and you are feeling down, we say you are dispirited- that is you are going through the motions of life, but feel too vulnerable to risk much. If a room has

no ventilation, no breeze that blows, it is a room in which the air is stagnant- nobody wants to be there until someone opens the windows, and the air stirs, the spirit moves. That is exactly what Acts describes happening to the little rag-tag group of dispirited followers of Jesus after he was gone. The circle of friends of Jesus, devastated by their loss, living in fear, behind closed doors is somehow energized, invigorated, empowered. The breath of God has filled them.

That is what God's Spirit is all about: living life with energy, vigour, power. That can be a little scary, unnerving, but it's what life is for. Life is too short to live it any other way. Which I think is what the people who call themselves "spiritual but not religious" are searching for- life that is fed by that unconfined and undefinable energy that makes it all worth it. I think that is exactly what most of us here long for as well, and what the wild story of Pentecost is all about.

Now having said that, I do believe that there are a couple of indicators that help us distinguish between what is the deep and powerful wind/energy of God and what is a kind of hollow emotionalism that can carry us off track- a fleeting gust of emotion.

First of all, what was invigorated and given power at Pentecost was not an individual, but was the community of believers- the body of Christ, not the body of Will, or Brenda, or Dan (as wild and out of control as he can be). It was the collective, and I believe that the enlivening of God's spirit takes place in the spaces between persons. Once again, John Wesley used to say that "the Bible knows nothing of solitary Christianity", and the gifts of the Spirit are given to US. I am suspicious of gifts that end up as private, solitary, and have no shared component to them, like "it's you and me Jesus." No, it's me as a part of us, and you as a part of a circle. At Pentecost, the Spirit caused speech in many languages, but it drew people together such that all understood, in their own tongue. The Spirit bridged all that separated people, and brought them together into a collective body.

I have been really interested to watch the unfolding of the election campaign down south and particularly, what passes for religious content. It can be quite entertaining, and sometimes a little scary. Every candidate, if they want to be elected, has to claim to be Christian in some way. However, what they mean by that varies wildly. But I don't think you can say with credibility that the same spirit of God which drew people together at Pentecost, that bridged all barriers between people from different places, backgrounds, faiths, languages and allowed them to come together as one is now calling for the building of walls and the propagation of suspicion and hate. I think there is something decidedly non-spiritual going on when that happens. That is not the spirit we celebrate today.

The second indicator that I look for is that the inspiration of the body always drives us out into the community. In John's version of the story, Jesus said to the disciples, "as God has sent me, so I send you." The breath of God may blow us inward for a time, in the same way that the Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, to sort things through, to find again the grounding in life, but inevitably, the breath of the Spirit tends to blow us outward into life.

One other indicator that I look for to authenticate experiences of Spirit has to do with Jesus' words as he blew on the disciples. He said, "receive the holy spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." The gift of the spirit opens wide the door of forgiveness, of reconciliation. And if ever there was needed a spiritual power in this world it is forgiveness- reconciliation. The breath of God, the spirit softens the heart and opens the mind. I question the authenticity of the preacher who, gripped by "the spirit" drives wedges in community. The preacher in the academy award winning film "Inherit the wind", zealous to drive out the evil of Darwinism, destroys his relationship with his daughter.

Friends, as we open to the holy wind and fire of the spirit, we discover a greater richness in the community. We find yourself driven out with renewed joy and confidence. And we notice within ourselves, a subtle openness of mind and a gentle softness of heart. These are signs that we've gone Pentecostal.