

“Living into Pentecost”
June 9, 2019 (Pentecost Sunday)
St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Acts 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost had come, they [the disciples] were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Romans 8:14, 19-26

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. 26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

This time of year, when we finally get to Pentecost, I always feel a little dizzy. For the past nearly two months, we’ve been on a quite the roller coaster!

Let’s review: on a dark Friday, a little more than seven weeks ago, our Lord and Savior is crucified on a Roman cross. But three days later, on Easter morning, he leaps up out of the grave – death cannot hold him – and for forty days, he stays on the ground, in the flesh, spending time with his friends, doing signs and wonders, almost like he’s wrapping up his earthly ministry. And then, we get to the Day of Ascension (which happened 10 days ago, if you’re keeping track!), the day when Jesus mysteriously ascends – or is drawn up – into heaven. The disciples are a little baffled at first (who wouldn’t be?); but they snap out of it quickly enough, and they get on with their work here on earth: which means they get on with worshipping God, as they wait to see what God will do next.

Oh, and I don’t want to forget one last thing. After the Day of Ascension, as the disciples wait to see what God will do next, they add one more thing to their plate. If you read Acts chapter 1, you’ll see that the disciples have organized themselves, and have elected a new disciple named Matthias, who is to take the

place of Judas Iscariot on their committee of twelve. Acts 1, in other words, tells the story of the church's first board meeting.

Waiting, gathering, worshipping, having committee meetings. This is what the disciples have been doing lately. Does any of this sound familiar? It's us! It's church. *Doing church*: that's what the disciples have been up to as they wait to see what God will do next.

By the time we get to chapter 2 of the book of Acts, Jesus' disciples have really grown – it's not just the twelve of them now, but their number has increased to as many as one hundred and twenty women and men. One hundred and twenty women and men, probably folks who are related in some way, definitely folks who know each other pretty well.

When we meet the disciples in our story today, they're in Jerusalem, and it just happens to be the International Festival of Harvest, a holy time set aside in the calendar to celebrate God's goodness through the gifts of the fruits of the earth. Well, as it turns out, *all* faithful people celebrate the Festival of Harvest – people from every corner of the globe – and they all come to Jerusalem to do it. So the city is teeming with people from around the world. With strangers. With foreigners.

Meanwhile, our friends the disciples are all gathered together in one place – it must be some kind of public place, where all these strangers can hear and see them – when suddenly, out of the blue, “there comes a sound like the rush of violent wind, and it fills the entire house where they are sitting.” All heaven breaks loose, and suddenly, the strangest thing starts happening. The disciples start speaking in other languages, and, miracle of miracles!, all those out-of-towners – all of those strangers, all of those outsiders – can suddenly understand the disciples, perfectly! It's incredible stuff. It's Holy Ghost-going-through-walls, busting-across-boundaries kind of stuff.

The disciples have just been minding their own business, when suddenly, the Holy Spirit bursts into the scene, and this gathering of one hundred and twenty women and men who all speak the same language and who all know each other so well *explodes* into a chaotic and colorful worship service, filled with people who, just a few minutes prior, would have probably never even exchanged two words with each other. Pretty amazing.

I know you know this about me by now: I tend to get pretty excited about Pentecost. I tend to get pretty excited about the Holy Spirit. But I haven't always been this way. In fact, before I went to seminary, I think it's fair to say that though I was comfortable with the first two persons of the Trinity – the Creator, and the Christ – when it came to the Holy Spirit, I felt kind of lost. I could picture Jesus for sure, and I felt like I had a pretty good handle on God the Creator, but the Spirit seemed so vague. Almost spooky. When I was growing up, my church called the Holy Spirit the “Holy Ghost,” and for good reason. There is something a little... haunting... about the Holy Spirit. The way the Holy Spirit can sneak up on you,

surprise you, the way the Holy Spirit can burst into your life, when all you're trying to do is mind your own business, the way the Holy Spirit – the way the Holy Ghost – can go through walls.

What exactly is the Holy Spirit, and what does it do? Well, let's begin here: what *do* we know about the Holy Spirit? Where is the Holy Spirit found in Scripture?

In Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8, the apostle writes, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." The Holy Spirit is who? The Holy Spirit is the giver of prayer. The Holy Spirit gives us the gift of prayer, and prayer not just for ourselves, but for, one another, and also for, and on behalf of, the whole creation. Sometimes, there are things that we are called to pray for – for ourselves, our neighbors, this wondrous creation – and the prayers really do go beyond words. Prayer is hard, in other words. How do we pray? So the Spirit, claims Paul, intercedes for us. The Spirit prays with and through us. And sometimes those prayers are more like sighs, or groans, than anything else.

But there's even more to what the Holy Spirit gives us. The Day of Pentecost is one of the most vivid and detailed accounts about the work of the Holy Spirit: sweeping through those early followers of Jesus, giving them a purpose, a prophecy, giving them dreams and visions, giving them new language, giving them each other. *Giving them each other*. Did you catch that?

One of the greatest gifts of the Holy Spirit is just that: the gift of one another. The gift of being the church, together. And certainly we know what that feels like, don't we? We know the gift of what it is to be the church together: we've talked about the gift of prayer, and we certainly know it here – sharing our joys and concerns, our delights and our sorrows. But we do other things, too, with each other: eating together, laughing together, crying together, baptizing together, taking communion together, visiting each other when we are sick, bringing food to each other, offering rides to each other, checking in on each other...

And sometimes, we do that because we know each other well – we have for years – and sometimes, we do it when we hardly know each other at all.

On the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit gathers the earliest church together, the church is made up both of people who have known each other for a long time (those 120 disciples), but the church also includes a lot of complete strangers – people who could not be more different from one another. They look different from each other. They have different customs, different ways of dressing, different ways of thinking, different families. The earliest church is made up of both people who know each other well, *and* also complete and total strangers.

And yet, the Spirit gives them, *all*, the gift of each other. The Holy Spirit sweeps over that motley crew, that chaotic and colorful gathering, and somehow, suddenly, they are able to look at each other across all those divides, all those boundaries, all those walls, *and understand each other*. By the grace and power

and mystery of the Holy Spirit, suddenly, they have more in common than they ever thought possible.

And you know what? *We get this*. I really think St. Paul's Church gets this. Though it's true that we know the gift of each other right here in this room – the folks we already know – many of us, thanks be to God, also suspect that there's more to the church than this. We know there are folks outside these walls who are hurting, who need us, who need our prayers, our love, our outreach. Many of us here are asking: who is not here yet? Who are we still being called to welcome?

So, St. Paul's, how might we continue to be goaded and guided and gifted by the Holy Spirit? How might we continue to welcome the stranger, the out-of-towner, the foreigner, the one who looks and acts different from us? How might we live out Pentecost in this place?

I believe the Holy Spirit is blowing in our church, rattling the walls, and also the walls of our hearts; and I see you listening; and I see you starting to move. It's amazing stuff. And God only knows, the Holy Ghost only knows, what comes next...

Thanks be to God.