

# **“The Softer Side of Pentecost”**

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The Community Church – Pentecost Sunday

**John 20: 19-23**

Reflecting on breath and spirit, author Frederick Buechner says this: “When ancient man confronted the mystery of death – which is also the mystery of life – when he looked at the body of a dead man and compared it with himself as a living being and wondered at what terrible change had come over it...one of the first things that struck him apparently was that whereas he, the living man, breathed, the dead man did not breathe. So to be dead meant to have no breath, and to be alive – to have the power to rise up and run and shout in the world – meant to have breath. And the conclusion, of course, was that breath is not just the little wisps of air that we breathe in and out, but that it is the very animating power of life itself. Breath is the livingness of those who are alive. This is why in so many languages the word for breath comes to mean not only the air that fills the lungs, but the mystery and power of life itself that fills a living person.

Today, as I said earlier, we celebrate Pentecost, the birthday of the church, a day we recall the wind and fire of God’s spirit that filled the disciples and began a church. As Luke tells the familiar story in Acts 2, we hear the wind, see the fire, then hear Peter tells the crowd, “God has given us the Holy Spirit.” He preaches the word and three thousand people confess faith in Christ and are baptized that very day. It was a marvelous thing. I keep waiting for God to give me that sermon! And how appropriate to have our groundbreaking ceremony on Pentecost. You might say we are celebrating the continued power and guidance of God’s Spirit in the life of our church. This new building is our affirmation that the wind still blows and the fire still burns in and through our life together.

But did you know that there is another Pentecost story in the New Testament, another account of the gift of the spirit? We heard it in our text from the Gospel of John. This Pentecost celebration is more quiet, contemplative, you might say softer. Jesus’ disciples are hiding behind locked doors in a house in Jerusalem. In a shocking, horrifying, disheartening chain of events, Jesus has been arrested and crucified. They are now afraid. Will they be next? “What is going to become of us?” Then suddenly, behind that locked door, Christ is with them.

He speaks a reassuring word, twice saying, “Peace be with you.” And then he commissions them: “As the Father has sent me, now I send you. It is time for you to go out there and continue the work I have begun.” But how are these frightened, intimidated, even marginally faithful people – remember they had all deserted him – possibly going to do this – fulfill this mission? And then it happens. Jesus breathes on them. They receive his breath, his spirit, and everything changes. No mighty wind and fire, but breath...simply breath.

But wait, haven’t we heard something like this before? My mind goes to Genesis 2 – the creation story: “Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man become a living being.” What a marvelous image – dust, then breath, and the dust comes alive, is a conscious being, animated by the very breath of God. Marvelous poetry!

That image from Genesis reminds me of the birth of our grandson, Ben. Some of you have heard this before. When Ben finally came out, after a difficult labor, he was as blue as the Pacific Ocean...not breathing. He was taken to the warming table and the pediatrician kept tapping on his foot, quietly encouraging him: “Come on now, come on, you can do this.” And then it happened. If I had looked away for an instant I would have missed it. He suddenly took a breath and immediately went from blue to pink, became a living being. It was as if God took hold of that little baby and said, “This one is like me, made in my image, I breathe into you my own life.” The Spirit breathed and Ben proclaimed, “I’m here!” Do you ever think of yourselves that way...as beings given life, sustained, by the spirit – the breath – of the divine. What might that mean?

We have two cats – perfectly good, catlike cats. They sleep and eat and drink, sit in the middle of my newspaper in the morning, chew on any potted plant they can find, and tip over vases filled with water. Perfectly fine cats – content to be cats.

But me, I’m not content. I still wonder what I’m going to be when I grow up. To be human is to live with a certain discontent, to live with the conviction that there is more to life than eating and sleeping and drinking, doing the same thing day after day. There is

always this yearning to improve on the present tense. I wonder if that is part of what it means to have this divine spirit within us? The Psalms speak again and again of yearning: Psalm 42: "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God." Jesus speaks of, indeed blesses, our hungering and thirsting – our yearning - for righteousness. Don't we all have this place in our hearts, this wondering and yearning place, that is always awake, always wondering what's next?

Now, yes, there is also this voice in our heads, the voice of reason, that taps its foot and asks, "Why are you never satisfied. Why can't you just make peace with your life the way it is?" It is a voice that is strong and persuasive. It is tempting to make peace with our yearning, to settle down in the wilderness instead of pushing on to the promised land. The disciples may have preferred to stay safe and secure in that locked room. But the Spirit wouldn't let them, would not allow them just to cope, to make do.

I recall the words of an elderly Jewish man, a survivor of the Holocaust, someone who had seen so much pain and suffering. And yet, even at an advanced age, when no one would blame him if he insisted he had seen enough, he said, "I waken each morning with the possibility of being surprised, not only in my own life, but in the life of someone I had not even noticed. God is working now, and so am I." That's what the Spirit does...keeps us awake, open, expectant, always ready for Christ himself to break through any locked door, to renew us, refresh us, even give us a whole new way of thinking.

And something else about this breath of God, this spirit: My mind goes back to God gazing upon a new born child and saying, "I have breathed into this child my own life." Do you begin to understand how precious you are, how unique, how wondrous? I suppose that as we live from day to day, it is easy to think of life as a neutral kind of thing, neither good nor bad, not caring much about how we live it, anymore than the ocean cares rather we swim in it or drown in it. But our text would seem to contradict that. To say that God has breathed God's very spirit into each of us is to say that life and the life-giving power from which we come does care, are not indifferent as to whether we sink or swim; that they wish us well and are at work toward that end. You have no substitute, you can never be replaced, your heart holds things for which there is no language and your life is a precious, unique, one of a kind, unsolved mystery. Dare to believe that.

In the words of Henri Nouwen, "It is my conviction that the words spoken to Jesus at his baptism, 'You are my beloved,' reveal the most intimate truth about all human beings, whether they belong to any particular religious tradition or not...All I hope is that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being...'You are the Beloved'...That's the truth of our lives. That's the truth I want you to claim for yourself."

And, finally, let us not forget that there is power behind this spirit – the power of change, of renewal, the power to sweep away old hatreds and points of view, the power to reach out to others, the power to make a difference. In my lifetime, I have been to two football games at Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Would it be blasphemy to call those visits a religious experience? But thinking back to those games – and you have experienced it in other settings – there is no denying the power of the spirit that was generated by the people in attendance. For a moment we were all transformed by it, intoxicated by it, sharing in the same wonderful madness of it all.

Well perhaps there is also a kind of wonderful madness in the spirit imparted by Jesus to those frightened disciples. In the house in Jerusalem, when he breathed on them, that desperate, frightened, diverse bunch became a church. Yes, they became a church, worshiping God, writing scriptures, praying and singing together, together seeking to do God's will. They became a church, going out and serving other people, hurting when other's hurt, caring when no one else would, emptying their pockets to help the children of people they didn't even know, painting the house of a disabled person when their own house was in need of repair. They empowered each other to do things and be things they could never have managed on their own. Who were these people? Who are these people? They are the people on whom God has breathed. They are the people on whom Christ has breathed. We are these people – people who have received the Holy Spirit. So let us dare to open ourselves to receive it; to address it and be addressed by it; to move in the direction that it seeks to move us, which is the direction of fuller and deeper communion with itself and with one another...fellow mystics, each and every one of us.