

“The Somewhere of the Spirit”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

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Pentecost Sunday

Pentecost was not an invention of the church. Pentecost was one of the Jewish pilgrimage festivals, which meant Jews would travel to Jerusalem much the way people annually make their way to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. Pentecoste, from the Greek, notes the fiftieth day, and Pentecost’s date was set to be fifty days after the Passover. It was originally a harvest festival, but by the first century, it had become a celebration of God’s sending the gift of the Torah, the law, to guide and direct God’s covenant community.

The Christian Pentecost parallel is clear, as today the church celebrates God’s sending the gift of the Holy Spirit, to guide and direct God’s covenant community. We date it seven weeks after Easter, which is almost fifty days.

Since Easter, we have read portions later in Acts than this morning’s Pentecost account, which have allowed us to peek at the workings of the Holy Spirit after it had arrived. This morning, we go back to Acts 2, to read of that event we call Pentecost.

Again, the setting is Jerusalem. The disciples are waiting there, all together, as Jesus instructed them to do. They are back to a full team of twelve as Matthias has been chosen to replace Judas. They don’t know exactly for what they are waiting, or for how long they are to wait, but the festival of Pentecost has arrived. People are coming to Jerusalem from other lands, all speaking their native languages. They are gathering in the streets, with some no doubt mingling outside the windows of the place the disciples were waiting.

Luke’s account of the first Pentecost in Acts 2 is printed in the bulletin for us to read responsively, with you being the crowd. At three points, we will join in the hymn, “On Pentecost They Gathered,” which parallels the biblical account. The words are printed in the bulletin, but for those who like to read the music, it is #289 in our hymnal.

Let us join in our Pentecost reading:

When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

**Response (seated): Hymn #289, verse 1** On Pentecost They Gathered

There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. They were surprised and amazed, saying,

**“Look, aren’t all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them?  
How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language?”**

In the crowd there were Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans and Arabs, saying again,

**“We hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!”**

They were all surprised and bewildered.

**Response (seated): Hymn #289, verse 2** On Pentecost They Gathered

Some asked each other,

**“What does this mean?”**

Others jeered at them, saying,

**“They’re full of new wine!”**

Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared,

[Peter] “Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! These people aren’t drunk, as you suspect; after all, it’s only nine o’clock in the morning! Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

[Joel] In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy.

Your young will see visions. Your old will dream dreams.

Even upon my servants, men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and a cloud of smoke. The sun will be changed into darkness, and the moon will be changed into blood, before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

**\* Response: Hymn #289, verses 3 and 4** On Pentecost They Gathered

We now turn to John’s Gospel, in which the arrival of the Holy Spirit takes place on Easter evening, not fifty days hence. As in Acts, the disciples are all together and in Jerusalem, but it is Jesus himself who appears to them after his resurrection. As we heard in our Assurance of Forgiveness: *Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”*

Our Gospel lesson for this morning goes back to Jesus’ final days with his disciples while still alive. He assures them they would not be left alone. He speaks of the Spirit of truth, one called the Advocate, or in some translations the Counselor, or Companion who would continue to be with them. Listen for the legal terms in the lesson. Let us hear our Gospel lesson in John 15 and 16:

<sup>26</sup>*“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. <sup>27</sup>You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.*

*... “I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. <sup>5</sup>But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ <sup>6</sup>But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts.*

*<sup>7</sup>Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. <sup>8</sup>And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: <sup>9</sup>about sin, because they do not believe in me; <sup>10</sup>about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; <sup>11</sup>about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. <sup>12</sup>"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. <sup>13</sup>When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup>He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. <sup>15</sup>All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*

As many of you know, the home we purchased in Ayer was livable, though the real estate listing indicated: "Needs updating and a little TLC." I suspect we surpassed simple tender loving care as we removed some walls and created others as part of our plan to have a home in which we could age in place. One of the things I decided to do was to level out the textured ceilings on the first floor, particularly the ones in the living room and kitchen that had the kind of long "drips" of which I am not particularly fond. So, I scraped off the loose drips and then proceeded to apply drywall compound to the rest of the ceiling to even it out. And I looked and saw it was good, the first day.

Then came the sanding. We covered the furniture with plastic, donned dual-filtered dust masks to protect our lungs, and goggles to prevent red eyes, since a pastor does not want to show up on Sunday with red eyes, even if it is only 9 in the morning! I began sanding with both pole and hand sanders. After a lot of effort, it was done, and while it would need to touch up some spots, again, the ceiling looked good. Yet, there was also a layer of beautiful white dust covering the plastic and every exposed surface. So, more work to be done.

Now, you might be wondering how this drywall dust has anything to do with Pentecost, but my connection to the Holy Spirit in what we found next. Remember I said the ceiling I sanded was on the first floor. There were no windows open as it was cold outside, and no heater was blowing air around the house. Yet, we soon discovered the sanded dust did not just drop down onto the floor and plastic covers, but it traveled up the stairs, where the furniture also had a fine layer of white. The next Sunday, I went to the closet and found a white coating on the shoulders of every suit and sports coat. It was then I decided to purchase a dust collection attachment for my vacuum, and while I had to wear ear protection because of the vacuum noise, there was no dust clean-up after doing the other ceiling. It was then I also wrote on a piece of paper: Pentecost, drywall dust.

When we imagine God, or the Holy Spirit, we speak of omnipresence, in terms of God's Spirit always being present; yet, we may also think of the Spirit as being as expansive and free as drywall dust, resting on every surface, and reaching into every opening of human life. "Where can I go escape your Spirit?," the Psalmist asks, "Where can I flee from your presence?" And then psalmist answers the questions, "I can't escape, I can't flee God's presence." God is as pervasive and present as drywall dust.

Yet, unlike drywall dust, which goes where it will, the Psalmist writes of a presence which desires to be with us. Many years ago, I received a copy of a children's message written by a colleague titled, "The God Who is Somewhere." It began with our concept of God being everywhere, but admitted as humans, we desire a God to be somewhere. The message was for Christmas Eve, and connected Jesus' arrival as God's answer to being somewhere, with us, not just everywhere. I thought about that children's message, for I also believe the sending of the Holy Spirit was not just to be out there, everywhere, but to be somewhere, connecting to humanity.

There is what I would call an "on each and for all" nature to Pentecost. The disciples were individually gifted and equipped to speak in other languages of the world, as the Spirit enabled each one. Yet, the images of the whole community of believers marks the Spirit's arrival as a gift for all, not just a few. The words of our texts emphasize the wholeness. The disciples were all together, the sound of wind filled the whole house. All were filled with the spirit, and on each and all there was something that looked like a flame of fire.

The sound of wind recalls the movement of God across chaos at creation, but we also remember God spoke to Elijah in a still small voice. The shape of fire recalls radical cleansing and judgment, but also the prophecy of John the Baptist that one who followed him would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is baptism day for the church, when the disciples are surprisingly opened to being shaped by God's Spirit; again, in a sense of "on each and for all," for what God is shaping is the church.

The Greek word for Spirit is *paraclete*, which in our reading was translated advocate. In French, the word "avocat" means lawyer, and as I noted before reading our Gospel, there is a legal sense in Jesus' description of the witnessing role of the Spirit to speak truth. The Spirit he breathed on the disciples on Easter evening, will stand alongside them as they speak and live God's truth.

The Spirit will also confront the world when it fails to recognize or receive truth. Yet, what is truth, and where is it found? Is it simply fleeting, floating, as dust in the wind? No, as we will read in the Book of Acts, truth is linked to God's loving, self-giving action made known in the life and teachings of Jesus.

When the Spirit arrived on Pentecost, the disciples were surprised and the crowds in the street reacted. Some simply wondered of the meaning of being able to understand the disciples in their own native languages. Others chocked it up to an early morning drinking party. As one suggests, the world reacted with "perplexed wonder and sarcastic accusation." [Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2008, p. 7]

This prompted my memory of the Tony Campolo quote on the bulletin cover: "You are as young as your dreams, and as old as your cynicism." As a speaker at Habitat for Humanity gatherings, and in other settings, he would remind us of how easy it is to pull away from the world with despair or cynicism, hatred or fear. At such times, we remember the Spirit, able to go anywhere, which chose to land somewhere; the Spirit enabling dreams and visions to create sparks of hope in dark times.

In the face of sarcasm and cynicism, all twelve disciples stood, and Peter spoke, and connected the arrival of the Spirit with a prophecy of Joel. For Peter, Joel's "in those days" are this day. The Spirit is here, not for one, but for all: young and old, male and female, servant and free, would dream dreams and see visions, and truth would open before them.

The Spirit stands with us as we dream and envision, and is our advocate when the truth of life is taken to court by powers of opposition. I like to think the truth we have to share is neither as fleeting as drywall dust, nor as rigid as doctrine. Rigid doctrine actually keeps us holed up in that room in Jerusalem, never venturing forth to new places. Just as the Spirit enabled the first disciples to speak good news outside their own boundaries of language and culture, so the Spirit continues to equip us to move beyond the sameness of our nation, religion and culture.

Not rigid doctrine, but also not fleeting dust which finds us wandering all over without direction. With the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' promise to remain with the disciples was fulfilled – God is still not just everywhere, but somewhere, with us. Let us encourage one another in being open to having Christ's Spirit breathed on each, and for all.