

## **Faith Aflame**

Communion Meditation - June 4, 2017

Scripture: Acts 2: 1-21

For being the third most important festival in the Christian year, following Easter and Christmas, I've always felt Pentecost was poorly timed. Why all this gearing up and celebrating how the Spirit comes to fire us up and make things new, just when everything seems to be winding down for the year? School is just about over and done; we're gearing down for summer. Frankly I bet most of us here this morning are looking forward to a slower pace and less stress in our lives for the next several months. So why couldn't we reschedule Pentecost for September, when the church and school year is just beginning?

The reason is that Pentecost actually started as a springtime festival in an agrarian society tied to the land. In Jewish tradition Pentecost was celebrated 50 days after Passover each spring, just at that moment in the growing cycle when the seeds' gestational period was complete, and the first fruits of grain were ready to be plucked as the crops ripened into fullness. Thus it marked a transition, from preparation to completion, from that which had been to that which was only now just coming to fullness.

Christians co-opted this Pentecost spring festival to mark the birth of the Church. For the earliest Christians, living in First Century Palestine, it was a natural moment to mark the passage from their old faith, Judaism, to a new one: Christianity. In the lesson from Acts we hear how the Holy Spirit suddenly came into the congregation of Jewish disciples just at the moment when Jews from all over the ancient world had gathered into Jerusalem to dedicate the first fruits of their crop to God. Thus the Church was born into a context of human diversity, and the disciples from the start were given the power to take Christ's message to all peoples, all around the world.

Anyone here who has witnessed the moment of human birth will know what a miracle it is, to see a child emerge from its mother, all gray and slimy, and then suddenly, with the intake of its first breath turn pink or brown as it comes alive, letting out a cry, the first sound of its life. What had been only in gestational form a moment earlier now suddenly transforms into a living being, a child, alive and healthy, all with the taking of its first breath. How interesting, that both the ancient languages of the Bible, Hebrew and Greek, use only one and the same word for breath, wind and spirit. In their mind, there was no distinct difference between these concepts. The Spirit was seen to be the breath of life. God breathed, and the Creation came alive. The wind blew over the face of the deep, and out of chaos there emerged new order and life.

So it was on the Day of Pentecost as well. A major transition happened, from one way of being to the next. In the earliest Christian community, the dispirited disciples had been hanging around the capital city of Jerusalem ever since Jesus had died on the cross some 50 days earlier. It had been a topsy-turvy time for them: one moment acute grief at the death of their leader, the next moment astonished glee at his Resurrection. Just as it seemed all was lost, suddenly the tables had turned, most unexpectedly. They had

witnessed what they'd long thought was impossible: the power of death being undone by a new kind of life. They had stood there watching, as the Risen Christ spoke to them and ate with them and gave them direction about what to do. But they were confused, bewildered, unsure of themselves. Everything was happening so suddenly around them. Nothing was following the standard script anymore for how things ought go. They knew they couldn't go back to what had been, but they couldn't figure out how to go forward into what was about to be. It was a major transitional moment.

As with a baby's first breath, Pentecost marks a transition from what had been to what now is starting to be. "*Pentecost*," writes Beverly Gaventa, "*is both an end and a beginning, the leaving behind of that which is past, the launching forth into that which is only now beginning to be. Pentecost therefore is not a time of completion. It is moving forward into new dimensions of being, whose basic forms are clear, but whose fulfillment has yet to be realized.*"<sup>1</sup> Like a newborn child, there's all the potential, yet none of the track record of how things actually will play out. It's an exhilarating, wonderful, and yet scary moment, to consider what this new life may portend.

Such was the feeling, I'm sure, for the people gathered together there in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Wow, what a rush! Yet how strange, and indescribable, and unpredictable. To suddenly have diverse people gathered together in one place, all speaking their own languages and doing things in their own unique and wonderful ways, yet understanding each other and cooperating together... it was nothing short of miraculous. The words of the story can't fully convey what a marvelous moment of unprecedented power and glory it was. The ancient legend of the Tower of Babel, with its lesson in the outcome of overreaching human pride, is suddenly undone. The power of God to scatter and confuse the human race is now superseded by God's sudden outpouring of the Spirit, bringing sinful human chaos into a blessed new state of harmony and understanding. Here where one moment we had a confused and disoriented bunch of disciples we now have a diverse and dynamic new community of faith. There's no going back to the way it once was. But who knows how this new thing will work out? Only God, and so far, she's not telling!

Here at the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury, we're in one of those transitional moments as Pentecost begins this year. Rick Otty, who was here for more than two years, has just left, and now you're stuck with me till the pastoral nominating committee completes its work and presents you with a candidate for the next installed pastor. In a way this means we're in an extended transitional period of indeterminate length, where our familiar old ways are changing into who knows what may be coming next. The ways we've known how to be a church, not just here at Sudbury but also in the nation and the world at large, how to worship and serve, are from a pre-21<sup>st</sup> Century era which now is fading away. The ways we're going to be a church next are only just being born. We see them occasionally in spontaneous glimpses. We feel them and sense them in the moments things seem to connect and work well for us as we contemplate new approaches to worship and to how we'll carry out our work together as the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury.

Yet what about that Presbyterian need of ours for everything to be under control? Is order and control the only way for Presbyterians to express their spirituality? Is there any place in our highly ordered system for mystery, for spontaneity, for wonder and surprise?

*“Control,”* writes Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, *“...precludes the Spirit. Yielding is not a gift given easily to the sophisticated, the affluent, the technologically able. Indeed, yielding is not a gift readily given among any of us humans who find yielding so much like dying.*

*“The news, of course, is that the wind blows where it will. And now it may indeed be blowing among us... out of control, out beyond liturgies that have settled in, out beyond settled packages of truth, out beyond conventional moralities. It is indeed a blowing that scares, that makes anxious, that evokes internal brutality; life midst such blowing does indeed become so ‘strange and new.’”*

As your new interim pastor, I feel like I’m presiding over a congregation where that wind is blowing right now. Who knows what our next chapter of life will look and feel like? I think it’s going to be different than it has been, even as recently as a few months ago. But I can’t tell you exactly what it’s going to be like. I myself don’t know. I’m learning once again that leading sometimes means letting go and that faith means following the Spirit as it blows into this body and sets our faith aflame with a power from beyond where we can control or know.

Brueggemann writes of the topsy-turvy times of transition, where everything we’ve known is turned upside down: *“The pastor presides over a congregation where the wind...upsets and... frightens; the pastor is paid to keep the storm windows up and in place. But where the spirit comes there may emerge communities that turn the world right side up; there may arise communities that can heal without silver and gold; there may be evoked gifts that violate old purity codes. The spirit as an interpretive reference point may cause us to rename our places of stress and anxiety as occasions of new comfort, just when all other hope and comfort has failed.”*<sup>2</sup>

On Pentecost we celebrate this kind of transition. We gather to recall how new faith came aflame just when it seemed there was no way to go back and no way to go forward. We give thanks that God continues to call us together with all kinds of people from all around the world to come together to be nourished by the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and to open ourselves to the wind of the Spirit that blows us where it wills.

Yes, thanks be to God. Amen.

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1. Beverly Gaventa, in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year A*, p. 329
  2. Walter Brueggemann, *Ibid.*