

## “The Other Pentecost”

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Growing up I was told that Pentecost Sunday (or Whitsunday in many Anglican and Methodist churches) is the birthday of the church. Birthdays can be celebrated in various ways, and sometimes birthdays are purposely overlooked. It is one thing not to want to add another birthday to the increasing number year after year. But it is something else not to want to remember a birth that changes everything for everyone touched by that birth. May I just remind you that your birthday is worth remembering, because the world became a better place because you were born. If we are tired of counting Pentecost as that unique day of birthing—Pentecost as noun, well, perhaps we can begin to count it as verb and adjective. How about we “do Pentecost.” Dare we “practice being Pentecostal?” Is that possible for Methodists?

The well-known preacher, professor and author Fred Craddock tells a rather funny story about a series of lectures he was giving at a seminary on the West Coast. One of the students stood up and said, “Before you speak, I need to know if you are Pentecostal.” The room grew silent. Craddock said he looked around for the Dean of the seminary; he was nowhere to be found. The student continued with his quiz right in front of everybody. Craddock was taken aback, and so he replies, “Do you mean, do I belong to a Pentecostal Church?” “No, I mean are you Pentecostal?” Craddock says, “Are you asking me if I am charismatic, perhaps, speak in tongues?” and the student replies, “I am asking you if you are Pentecostal.” Craddock sighs and says, “I don’t think I know what you are asking.” The student, on his way out of the room, was overhead to say, “Obviously, you are not Pentecostal.”

I’m not sure what to make of that story, but I hope First United Methodist Church will resist being satisfied with Pentecost solely as noun—name, date, place, event, distant memory, something way back in the past somewhere! Let’s keep learning how to live into the word as verb and as adjective, a word – one among others – that describes this church! To the degree we are alive, vital and vibrant, and sent, well, we are Pentecostal, and if not, well, I’d rather not speculate.

Perhaps it may be helpful to get reoriented, on a Volunteer Appreciation Sunday, no less, and recall that there are two accounts of Pentecost, one recorded in *Acts* and the other in John’s gospel. Does that surprise you? The backdrop for the *Acts* reading (chapter 2) is the Jewish story, found in *Exodus*, chapter 20, of the giving of the Ten Commandments, in a way the birthday of a people, the giving of the Law, a revelation from God through commandments. In *Acts*, Pentecost takes place in Jerusalem, some 120 people crowded in a building, with hundreds, hundreds of people in the streets for the festival that falls 50 days after Passover. According to *Acts*, oh, the wind, a violent wind picks up, sweeps through the place, and something like fire sweeps down, too. And even though nobody gets burnt, plenty were touched, and were never again the same. Peter stands up and says “God has given us Holy Spirit!” And that day some 3,000 people confessed faith in Christ and were baptized. Wow. All we can say is “Wow.”

*Acts 2* is the Pentecost story behind Steve Garnass-Holmes' poem I sent out this week.

“Not little candles, but furious furnaces, volcanoes of love, burning as in you right now, every heartbeat God's arson of the soul, each breath the Spirit's inner hurricane afire with mercy, a dynamo powerful enough to blow you out into the world and do miracles. Trust this when you feel small and fragile, the flaming sun within.” Wow. Wow, indeed.

And the other Pentecost—there's another one? Turn in the bulletin to the other one, and let's read these verses responsively.

“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

**After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 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.”** (John 20:19-22)

We are still in Jerusalem, but now in a quiet little house in seems. Some of the disciples are present, although we don't know which ones or how many. They are scared, hence the locked doors. And even though the door doesn't open, the living Christ is suddenly with them. “Peace,” and it isn't clear who was speaking. Then they look at the hands, the side, and an awareness settles on them—“It is the Lord.” Once aware, the blessing could be given and received. “Just as I have been sent, you are now sent—it's up to you, now!” And then, heaven help us, and then Jesus breathes on them. Oh, it wasn't a great wind, *ruah*, in Hebrew, but human breath, *ruah* in Hebrew. Breath, followed with three words: “Receive Holy Spirit” – *ruah* in Hebrew. They are all the same word.

And the story behind this story? It is not Exodus 20, the Law thundering down from Sinai, smoke and fire, but *Genesis 2*. “God breathes into their nostrils, and they become living souls.” Quiet as a whisper, and poetic, too, and artistic as Michelangelo's divine finger touching human fingers, high above the Sistine Chapel. And the meaning? Well, the backdrop to this other Pentecost suggests that we would have been little more than the giraffe or the dolphin, hummingbird or stallion, had not God breathed on us. Wow. Wow, indeed.

One writer put it this way:

“This is why human beings are not content with just eating and drinking, working and showing off and then dying; every animal does that. Human beings long for God, search the heavens, write poetry, play music, spread art all over the world, . . . and ponder about how they might live after they die, since they have *ruah*, the wind, spirit, breath, of God.”

I suspect this may be the reason David, who was so caught up with eating and drinking, working and bragging and, oh yeah, taking Bathsheba from her soldier husband and then killing him in a cover up, might this be why David prayed, in a moment of utter clarity and shame—“Do not take back your Spirit. I'm barely better than an animal now. Take not your Spirit!”

And John tells us that the *Logos*, the Word of God, not the bible, but the Word of God in human form, breathed on the disciples. “Receive Holy Spirit.” As faint as breath, quiet as a whisper.

And those disciples became a movement. They gathered to pray, testify, break bread, drink wine, they formed to help others, breathed on others, enlisted the help of others. On a Volunteer Appreciation Sunday, we would do well to remember “Never to doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.” Why? “Because it’s the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead, the famous American cultural anthropologist, said it first in the 1950s, but if she were here she would say it again to us!

The living *Logos*, God’s Christ, is still breathing on us and saying “as I am sent, so you are being sent—it’s up to you to continue the work.” And this is why we do the things we do. There are days when we feel a little under that weather; some days more than a little discouraged. But we still show up to help others who feel worse and are even more depressed! This is why we empty out our pockets, week after week; its why we help not only here at home but around the world with a global reach through a global church that is amazing. It is why we will work on a Habitat site for the next two years, when our own houses may need new windows and a new coat of paint. I can’t explain it any better than that.

On this Pentecost and Volunteer Appreciation Sunday, with grateful hearts, let us be satisfied to simply sing: “Breathe on us Breath of God. Keep filling us with life anew. That we may continue to love as thou dost love, and do as thou wouldst do.” Amen.