

“The Breath That Makes Us One” (for website)
Acts 2:1-8; 11b-21
June 8, 2014 First United Church of Arvada
Rev. Karin Kilpatric

Ten days after the ascension of Jesus and fifty days after the Easter resurrection, we have arrived at Pentecost, the Birthday of the Christian Church. We have just heard the story of the first Pentecost in this passage from Acts. “When the day of Pentecost had come they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

At the time of Pentecost, God breathed into each soul and a great democratization of spirit took place. The Holy Spirit became directly available to all. The crowd, which had gathered for the Jewish Feast of the Oaths, to celebrate God’s covenant with Noah, Abraham, and Moses, were now taken by surprise by the wind of the spirit. No more would there be a need for a mediator between God and each human being—no priest or emperor or prophet or king. Not even Jesus’ earthly presence would be needed. The Holy Spirit was accessible to all. The tongues of fire, which rested on each one gathered on that first birthday of the church might be imagined as the action of a passionate God baptizing each into the passion of his/her own calling.

Then, suddenly, the people who spoke different languages could understand each other. Does that mean that now they all thought alike. Not likely, or at least, I hope not. When everyone thinks alike it is very doubtful that anyone is doing any thinking at all. Human imaginations, cognitive understandings, and verbal expressions are deliciously varied when they deal with anything that really matters. So, it probably was a noisy day there in Jerusalem on Pentecost. Pardon the language, but folks were no doubt “blown away” by what they experienced. The

miracle wasn't about a uniformity of perception or expression, but was rather, a powerful welcoming of diversity.

Welcoming Diversity, finding a common language, experiencing the winds of change and the movement of possibility. Even though we know how the story continues over time with schisms and power struggles and the building of church structures that are motivated by greed and a deep need to control the uniqueness of human experience and expression, in *this* moment all came together. In *this* moment those gathered realized that unity and passion could be joined together. We are called to more by our faith in God than most of us allow ourselves to accept. Not just priests and ministers, monks and martyrs, not just the spiritual giants throughout history and in our time, but each of us are called to our God given greatness.

On Pentecost, the wind of the spirit, the breath of God, became equally available to each individual; man and woman, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, adult and child, peasant and king. And yet, life in the spirit would never be only a *personal* matter, but would always be radically *communal*. The church born on that day was a community of believers; noisy, rambunctious, unruly and probably just as self-contradictory and prideful as the folks in the congregations of most churches today. But then as now, and as the words Peter quoted from scripture described, these folks also received the eternal gifts of the spirit; prophesy, teaching, visioning and dreams of the holy. All these were now accessible to them.

As I pondered this touch of the flame, this passion of Pentecost, it occurred to me that one of the things we are being called to today is a different kind of speaking. We have come to a tragic impasse in the way we relate to each other, especially in the public sphere. We feel we have a right to our opinions but no obligation to understand where they come from or why they are valid. We have a right to our perspectives but these perspectives often have no foundation or, at least, not one we recognize or 'fess up to. In our public disagreements we are often oblivious to what the other, who has now become our "opponent" believes. We are so busy defending

our egos in the guise of holding a particular viewpoint, that we can't allow ourselves to really take in the thoughts another has or conclusions he or she may have reached, or what value they might have to this world. Perhaps the worse part is that we aren't even curious about the other. I remember something my father taught me, when I was a young girl. He said that in order to lead a joyful and interesting life, you must have curiosity. Without curiosity all becomes dull, your own ideas become lifeless and uninspiring, even to you. To have true community we must be curious about each other as well as the world around us.

The Holy Spirit, the breath of God was a transforming breath, requiring both personal change and collective effort—prayer and peacemaking, faith and action. Individuals were born into the faith that first Pentecost, but for better or for worse, they were not just renewed as individuals, but a whole collective body, was given birth. This body became the Christian Church, which would spread across the globe for the next 2,000+ years.

You may remember that the English word, *spirit*, comes from the Latin *spiritus*, meaning "breath." Spirit has no material body and it cannot be measured or counted. It is incorporeal and unquantifiable. Yet, it is intimately present in all living things as the very breath at their center. If we truly believe that we carry this spirit within us and that our neighbor also has access to this spirit, this breath of life, we don't have to be afraid to listen—in fact, we will feel compelled to listen, as if another perspective is a gift for us not a threat to us.

Then suddenly, the people who spoke different languages could understand each other. Human beings are connected to each other in ways we too seldom trust or acknowledge. These connections to each other, despite our differences, are as fascinating as they are frustrating, as meaningful as they are agonizing. We share the same earth, the same water, the same breath.

I would like to close today with some excerpts from a prayer on the intimate sharing of our breath. These excerpts are from a longer prayer written by Jewish Rabbi, Joe Klein.

How can we be strangers
When this moment
I breathe in and out
The same thousands of nitrogen molecules
That were in the deep breath
Of your great great grandmother
Whom you never met,
Swept up into the winds of the planet
To join the international stock
Of terrestrial atmosphere,
To join the natural and necessary breaths
Of every creature that ever sighed...

How can we be strangers
When a year from now
You will breathe in and out
The same thousands of nitrogen molecules
That were in my deep breath
This moment?
We are not strangers at all,
We are most intimate,
For what is in you was once in me
And will be again...

The stuff of the distant past
And the breath of great creatures
We've never ever known
Blend seamlessly with
Future souls.
Air is the ultimate intimacy,
All of us drinking from the same
Bottomless cup,
Ruach Elohim,
Eternal wind,
Blessed be the breath
That makes us one...