

“Breathing Deeply Again and Again”
Pentecost Sunday, Year A, June 4, 2017
Numbers 11:24-30 Acts 2:1-21 John 20:19-23
First Presbyterian Church of Sandpoint, Idaho
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Christ is risen, and as these Sunday’s of the Easter season conclude, we remember that every Sunday is the Lord’s Day as we celebrate the empty tomb, the living Christ, and the co-missioning of the church. Pentecost Sunday is a celebration of these very things as God with us deepens even more. There’s a few things that stand out for us today, things that catch our attention for good reason. One is that red is symbolic of that fiery presence of the Holy Spirit. Wearing red and decorating the church with bright colors is one way to celebrate. But this is also an external thing.

Religious people have suffered too long from believing that externals are how you live your faith, whether it’s following biblical principles, adhering to church tradition, or praying in certain ways. Receiving the Holy Spirit is intended to fill us, change us, and send us from the inside. Our heart is where God’s Presence dwells. The passage from John shows us that the Peace of Christ entering into us is as intimate as breathing. Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit onto, into, and through the disciples. (breathe deep). This internal presence is powerfully life changing as it restores the divine image in us.

Another thing that stands out is how people often call this the birthday of the church, as if God’s Holy Spirit was not active before Pentecost. That’s why we read from Numbers and hear the story of the Hebrew people who recognized God’s powerful presence through the prophets. Some of the people complained to Moses that Eldad and Medad were also prophetically used by God. Moses basically says, “Why should I be upset? The more the merrier!” and he wishes for the LORD’s spirit to be on all the people. Pentecost celebrates that very thing!

Something else that stands out is how Acts 2 says, “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” This is not an individual act, but an experience of the community. Our lives are not lived in isolation, but we’re connected with others. Pentecost in that time was a lot like our Thanksgiving. People gather together to celebrate God’s abundant care and provision. Much like Thanksgiving is the most traveled holiday in America, Pentecost was a very big deal and people would come from all the known world to Jerusalem. They had come, they had gathered in one place.

The disciples are in a house and the Holy Spirit comes with a loud sound like a rushing wind. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, other languages, and it’s the Spirit that gives them this ability. God’s Spirit gives the ability to speak in ways that other people understand. Yet even with all the speaking and listening, everyone is confused. Acts says, “All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’”

What stands out for us with that question is the confusion, the questions that are asked that may or may not have answers, and the mix of amazement even with the perplexing experience.

We recently had a questionnaire circulating for church members and friends to fill out and turn in. The results have been gathered together and the Session will use this information as we enter into a more thorough visioning process starting next winter. As I look over the responses, I notice themes that echo the experience of the early church. Perplexed, confused, but amazed and excited. Generally, we recognize that God is at work in our midst but it's easy to get frightened at signs of institutional decline. It seems like the typical healthy church in America is expected to be everything to everybody, brimming with people of all ages, vibrant with programs to address every need. Members filling the pews and offering plates filled to overflowing. These ideal images of an attraction model are proving more and more to just not work. Conversation about these dynamics and expectations will continue.

For me, there is comfort in trusting the work of God's Holy Spirit, and that excitement mixed with confusion is a quality of the church that is perpetual. Even on that Pentecost day in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit had a mixed review from the people, some of them noticing God's energy at work in the disciples, while others sneer and write them off as drunk. It seems that God is doing something but not everyone picks up on exactly what that is. Why would we be any different?

At the Presbytery level, we've been having webinars and retreats and meetings that seek to do what our questionnaire tries to do. Presbytery of the Inland Northwest is looking at questions exploring institutional survival. Churches are invited to join groups to explore the most pressing issues our congregations are facing. But as I take a step back, part of me wonders, what if God is undoing the church in its present form in order to bring about something new? What if the decline of the church as we know it in North America is Spirit led? God's Holy Spirit is continually creative, calling us forward. But in a cruciform model, something dies in order to bring new life.

If we struggle to make the institution survive, wouldn't we be struggling against the movement of God? No wonder it's frightening, and involves suffering, anguish, fear, worry, and a whole host of things to complain about, like the elders trying to get Moses riled up.

This Pentecost, we're not so much celebrating the birthday of the church as we are trusting the continuing leading of the Holy Spirit. We're not so much focused on the disciples huddled together in a room with the doors locked because they are fearful of external threats, as we are focused on Christ appearing, breathing peace. Breathing deeply, again and again, the Peace of Christ in our lives is as close as each breath. This peace is not an external validation for how we think the world or the church should be, but is an internal reclamation of divine presence and the renewed incarnation of Christ in and through our very lives as we are claimed, filled, and sent in goodness and love as Christ's body in the world, as the church, a community of faith.

As God's Spirit fills us, and these biblical stories echo through the ages, one final thing that stands out for us today is how counter-cultural the Christian Way is in our world. Social systems, be it communism, socialism, the free market, capitalism, authoritarianism, terrorism, lots of -isms; all these are time sensitive and limited.

Christianity as an archetypal religion reflects eternal values. Where there is extreme individualism, let there be community. Where there is greed, let there be generosity. Where there is power, let there be deep wisdom. Where there is violence, let there be peace. Where there is arrogance, let there be humbleness. Where there is death, let life abound.

Breathing deep the peace of Christ helps us let go of what binds us, and helps us prepare for whatever it is that God is bringing as the next thing. Breathing deep the peace of Christ helps us listen for God's voice, and helps us speak in ways that transform the world as we are in co-mission with God, commissioned to serve. We are invited to grow deeper into the Peace of Christ and the living Presence of God's Spirit. But how are you going to encourage this growth in your life? How do you breathe deep?

As I walked through the woods behind my house the other day, a question came. What's your inch? What's your inch this spring? When you walk through the woods this time of year you may notice the spring green emerging as the tips of the branches have very soft, bright green needles forming. Growth happens. The big trees you see swaying in the wind, all that growth took place an inch at a time, year after year, patiently and steady.

Later, on that same walk, I saw a woman and a little girl on the opposite sidewalk from me, heading the other way. The girl was young, maybe kindergarten age? The woman, likely the girl's mother, was pulling the daughter along by the hand, not really in a big rush, but not strolling either. The daughter was trying to go slower, pointing her arm, stretching out in amazement at everything around her as they were passing by, walking slowly looking at all the things, wanting to show and share with the mom, but she didn't seem all that interested.

How do we nurture the awareness to notice what is going on around us? How do we become patient in life with God, ourselves, and one another? What's your inch this spring as we seek to invite God to help us grow? Growth happens and the world changes every day. Are we open to receiving God's movement, or do we resist, and try and cling to something less than what God would offer from abundance, care, and creative love?

May God help us grow well, breathing deep again and again the peace of Christ, so we may be sent to share what we notice when we are most aware. And may God be glorified, now and forever. Amen.