

Pentecost Sunday, May 20, 2018
Acts 2: 1-11; 1Corinthians 12:4-13; John 7:15:26-27
The Rev. Devon Anderson

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh opens every meditation practice he leads with a simple breathing exercise. Here's how it goes: "Breathe in, calm my body. Breathe out, smile." It's that simple. Let's try it together: "Breathe in, calm my body. Breathe out, smile." Feels good, huh? One more time for good measure.

You look great, and you have just taken into your body the meaning of Pentecost. What we celebrate this feast day, in all simplicity, is an exchange of breath. That is what happened 2000 years ago in that cramped, upper room in Jerusalem. There Jesus, willingly and for the love of us, let out his last breath. His breath was a breath full of passion and love and life, full of goodness and power. Rather than dissipating into the air like most breaths do, it grew in strength and volume until it was a mighty wind, whipping through the room, striking sparks that burst into flames above the heads of Jesus' friends and followers.

The scriptures tell us there were about 120 people in that room on that first Pentecost, all party to the wild wind that swirled and tossed and raged around them. And they breathed in – deep, long pulls of breath and as they did they were literally, physically filled with the breath of God. And then something clamped down and the air came back out in languages they didn't know they knew. The large crowds outside, surprised to hear their own languages, were drawn like moths to flame, pushing through doors, crowding in, all wanting to breathe in the wild, crazy, intoxicating energy of that room. Scripture tells us that before the day was over, the church was born, growing from 120 to 3000 people, each having breathed in God himself, each having been transformed as the Holy Spirit entered them and changed them forever. Breathe in: God. Breathe out: Smile.

"The Book of Acts," says the theologian Barbara Brown Taylor, "is the story of the adventures of the people who were there that Pentecost day, which is why I like to think of the Book of Acts as the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. In the first four books of the New Testament, we learn the good news of what God did through Jesus Christ. In the book of Acts, we learn the good news of what God did through the Holy Spirit, by performing artificial resuscitation on a room full of well-intentioned bumbler and turning them into a force that changed the history of the world."

I *love* the Pentecost story and I need to hear it every, single year -- if only to re-consider its central question: *do we still believe in a God that acts like that?* Do we still believe in a God who blows through locked doors, who can radically change us, who sets our hearts on fire? Do we still believe in a God who, through the Holy Spirit, can sweep into our lives on any given day and *knock our socks off?*

William Willimon is a bishop in the United Methodist Church and is thought to be one of the best preachers of our time. He has written that in this day and age we little anticipate the Holy Spirit, that we don't believe in a God that can act like that first day of Pentecost. Willimon writes, "we are far more inclined to gather for worship, hoping beyond hope for words of comfort and peace. We much prefer things to be neat and in order. We are little prepared for a holy hurricane, for a mighty wind to blow in our midst, for tongues of fire to rest upon our heads." The disciples, he argues, had the benefit of

knowing Jesus himself and they expected (or at least weren't that surprised) by crazy things like windstorms in living rooms and air catching on fire. Maybe because we live by the story and not by the in-person experience, he thinks, we have lost our receptivity, our hopeful expectation of the power of the Holy Spirit to be palpably present and real to us.

I think poor bishop Willimon takes a pessimistic view, and I do not share it. Because I'm here to tell you: the Holy Spirit blows our socks off all the time, just as present and dramatic as that first Pentecost when it filled the lungs and bodies of Jesus' disciples. I don't think time has diminished that power one, single bit – it's there, all around us whether we see it or not, want it or not, ask for it or not. There are all sorts of ways the Holy Spirit whips around our daily lives. And if you're curious, one big hint is that the Holy Spirit can often be detected in heightened moments for which we have no explanation. Or better yet, in any unseen sounds and wonders that make us look up in amazement.

One way the Holy Spirit acts is when we are gifted with a sense of a **new beginning or a fresh perspective**. This week I read an interview in Sojourners magazine between Jim Wallis and former president Jimmy Carter. In it Wallis asked Carter: "If you could see God face to face, what's the first thing you'd say or the first question you'd ask?" And Carter responded this way:

That [same] question was asked in USA Today magazine a few years ago, and the question a lot of people wanted to ask God was: "What is my purpose in life?" Questions of purpose are important. But I think I would be in a mode of thanksgiving.

As I've gotten older and older, I've changed more from entreaties – from asking God for things for [myself and] the people I love – to just being thankful for the blessings that I've received. I try to remind myself during each day about all the wonderful things that God has let me have: not only life but also freedom to act as I want to. God has given every person not only life and freedom but also the capabilities to live a successful life – at least as measured by God. Those are wonderful gifts that we have received, and I try to remind myself to be thankful for them.

Carter's evolution, to me, is truly stunning. When we are able to move, over the course of our life, from need to gratitude, when we move from inward to outward, when we look up one day and realize that we have changed, when things that once tore our heart out before don't really bother us anymore, when old conflicts have morphed into wisdom, when we discover that we have evolved over time, *transformed into something new* – when that sudden realization dawns on us and takes our breath away, **you can call it anything you want, but I call it the Holy Spirit.**

The Holy Spirit also presents itself **wherever there is delight**. "Rest and laughter are the most spiritual acts of all," writes essayist Annie Lamott. And she's right. On Thursday night Michael and I settled into our seats at the Orpheum Theater to see the great David Byrne in concert. Because he is a visual artist as well as a musician, because he is a choreographer as well as a rock icon, the show was a feast of imagination and creativity, full of clever and intentional details that illuminated the music. The prop-less stage was framed on three sides by a chainmail-like curtain, creating a black box feel, an austere and blank canvas on which to project shadow and color. Musicians carried on their body any instrument they played as they danced and leapt alongside Byrne and a dynamic collaboration of artists of every shape and color. All of this swirl and cohesion culminated in an expression of joy, a celebration in the truest sense, a convergence of message and spirit, festival and energy. And it seemed as if everyone present

was swept up, together in that place, laughing and moving, singing and watching. **You can call it what you want. I call it the Holy Spirit.**

Many times, the Holy Spirit blows through and manifests **as a call to serve**. I don't know about you, but I was up at 5:30 am Saturday morning watching BBC coverage of the royal wedding. Okay - I do care who designed Meghan Markle's dress. That was part of it. But mostly I tuned in for the sermon. For those of you who heard it, you know: our Presiding Bishop did not disappoint. The man can preach. While the sermon was warm, while it was pastoral and funny and engaging – it was also prophetic. Bishop Curry did not shy away from the call to serve by preaching the Gospel in front of the whole world, by preaching about the fire and capacity of love. *Love is not only about a young couple*, he said, *“Now the power of love is demonstrated by the fact that we are all here. Two people fell in love and we all showed up. But it's not just for and about a young couple. It's more than that. It's so much more than that.*

Bishop Curry went on to talk about the unbridled power of love, and if harnessed like the earliest humans harnessed fire, its capacity to change the course of human history. He asked us to visualize what it would be like. *Love is not selfish or self-centered*, he said. *Love can be sacrificial. And in so doing, becomes redemptive, and that way unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive love changes lives. And it can change the world. If you don't believe me...imagine a world where love is the way. Imagine our homes and families when love is the way. Imagine neighborhoods and communities where love is the way. Imagine governments and nations where love is the way. Imagine business and commerce when love is the way. Imagine his tired old world when love is the way, unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive. When love is the way, no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, we let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook. When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary. When love is the way, we will lay down our swords...down by the riverside to study war no more. When love is the way, there's plenty good room for all of God's children. Because when love is the way, we actually treat each other like we are actually family. When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all and we are brothers and sisters, children of God. My brothers and sisters, that's a new heaven, a new earth, a new world, a new human family.* Simply, Bishop Curry went for it. He knocked the world's socks off, and in so doing, exposed the best kept secret that is the Episcopal Church. **Call it whatever you want, but I call it the Holy Spirit.**

And finally: the Holy Spirit is alive and well and continuing to blow our minds **in the ordinary and the daily**. “And here in dust and dirt,” wrote George Herbert, “And here in the dust and dirt/O here/The lilies of his love appears.” This morning we will baptize Reagan and her brother William, whose parents Robyn and Tommy only recently walked through our doors at Trinity. “Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world” – the Wartmans walked into this church and found, here among you, a home. What was that invisible lure that led them here? What was the energy that reached out to them and welcomed them home? **You may call it anything you like, but I call it the Holy Spirit.** I promise you: we will be changed as a community because the Wartmans and Dayna and Kay are joining Trinity Church today. And we know this because we have been changed by so many others in the past few years – who have found their way to this community and entwined their lives with ours. It thrills and amazes me when I think about Trinity's renewal and transformation these past few years, brought about by the initiatives and insight and faithfulness we've been offered by our newest members. No self-respecting faith community wants newcomers for an annual pledge or so they can take their turn on committees.

No. New parishioners bring with them their own experiences with the living God, and when they are invited to share what they know and believe our community is renewed and deepened beyond our wildest imaginations. And when that happens **you can call it anything you want, but I call it the Holy Spirit.**

The God of the first Pentecost is the same God of today's Pentecost – as dynamic and creative, passionate and fiery as ever. Anytime we want we can breathe in deeply for a full dose of Holy Spirit, filling ourselves with all the power and affirmation we could ever need. God is outrageous. God is dramatic. I believe in a God who still acts like that. What about you? AMEN.

Sources:

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<https://plumvillage.org/sutra/discourse-on-the-full-awareness-of-breathing/>

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Sojourners Magazine, interview with President Jimmy Carter, <https://sojo.net/articles/jimmy-carter-faith-and-basic-principles-shouldn-t-be-ever-questioned>.

Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, p. 174.

For the text and video of Bishop Curry's royal wedding sermon:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/19/style/bishop-michael-curry-royal-wedding.html>