

Pentecost Sunday
May 27, 2007

Acts 2: 1-21
Romans 8:14-17
John 14:8-17

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On the one hand, air seems so harmless. Breath itself is almost unnoticed. From one second to the next, we do not think of breath, unless we have the hiccups. Air moving, in gentle wafts, is pleasant, refreshing, but again, almost unnoticed.

Yet breath is the power of life. And the power of death. The very breath of God moved over the waters of creation, and life came into being. A baby springs forth into the world, takes a breath, cries and the mystery and miracle of life comes again. Whip that air into a frenzy and houses are lifted off their foundations, trees are uprooted from the earth, and everything living will need to take cover or risk the possibility that life will be over.

All from a bit of air, a bit of breath that has power.

A sixth-grader gave this definition for wind. "The wind is air, only pushier." *

The pushiness of the wind is the point of Pentecost. We do not have to know every scientific fact of air or the wind to appreciate this stirring moment in the life of the church. We need only understand the power of such force. The strength of that wind explains how the Holy Spirit works. If God is going to deal with the wreckage of the world in any substantive way, and save people from their sins, God is going to have to get pushy. God is going to have to offer the extraordinary power of the Spirit. The source of the wind is no wimpy sovereign, no soft touch who doles out newness of life through the gift of mood rings and free back massages. No, God breathes life into the church through mighty rush of wind because nothing less will work. The surge of the Spirit pushes the church out of the upper room in Jerusalem, and into the board room, the courtroom, the class room and the surgery waiting room.*

When the wind blows, things happen. In your backyard, the tree branches crash onto the garage roof, leaves and debris swirl near fence corners and the hanging potted plants tremble. In God's backyard, the breath of God brings new worlds into being. Dry bones come to life. Principalities and power fall. Churches are born.

When the wind of Pentecost blew through Jerusalem, a new world came into being. As disciples filled a house and crowds of others from foreign places milled about, a blast of wind arose. An eerie howl became a fierce gale. Who could concentrate, much less think, in such gusty circumstances? Pandemonium seemed the only possible outcome. Yet in the midst of that buzzing confusion, things began to break open. The people of God began to discover that their old ways of relating to one another and thinking of God had been blown out the window.

When God breathed upon that company of first disciples assembled in Jerusalem, they felt it was a wind, but it was really a breath of hope and life, the likes of which no one had ever known. No wonder there was a contingent who thought they detected too much revelry, too much of yet another kind of spirit at work. (These guys must have been into the wine too early!)

Prior to Pentecost, the prophets possessed the wisdom and the vision of the community. Now everyone had something to say on God's behalf. Cretans, Arabians, Parthians and Galileans. Short-order cooks, hospice volunteers, retired farmers and learning-disabled kids. All were part of the

picture. It is hard to envision a more diverse gathering of people. As scripture tells us, every nation under heaven had someone present.

Even more unbelievable, was the fact that people understood one another. Cretans remained Cretans, retired farmers remained retired farmers, but they understood one another. Each tribe and each individual received the gift of the Gospel in his or her own language.

Here's another interesting definition. Conspiracy. Con, means with or together. Spire, means breathing. Conspiracy literally means breathing together. Could it be that Pentecost was a conspiracy, breathing together, not in the sense of some evil design or sinister gathering, but as a consensus of good? The rush of the wind broke down the barriers. The Spirit of God permitted different people to begin breathing together. A dramatic and spectacular conspiracy was underway. The Spirit of God has begun to reconfigure lives.*

No matter how bitterly divided the world, the spirit-swept church persists with the wondrous claim that even people who are completely different from one another can come to understand one another. The breath of the Spirit of God makes for vigorous forms of new life.

Some years ago I worked with a church that benefited from a visiting pastor during Vacation Bible School. He was from Tanzania and was studying at Wartbury Seminary. During the summer, a group of churches banded together and hosted him and his family. He moved from church to church, preaching and often working with children during Vacation Bible School.

During the week, we shared the third Lutheran Sacrament, the Potluck Dinner. This pastor's nine year old son, Amos, soon made friends with Andrew, the son of the church secretary. As little boys are wont to do, they were running the halls of the church, in one door and out the other, laughing and enjoying themselves.

Sandy, the secretary, was amazed at how quickly and how well the boys were able to get along and seemed to communicate just fine. She asked her son, "Does Amos speak English?"

"Sure," Andrew answered, "just like me." And they were off to the playground outside.

Later Sandy asked the Pastor "Has your son, Amos, already studied English in school?"

The pastor said "No, he does not speak any English."

How is it that children know another language? A language of play, or friendship, perhaps even of love. We saw the very breath of God at work that day, the spirit building up relationships within the church.

I just spent a week in Nashville at a preaching conference. 1700 pastors from all over the country, listening to preachers from all sorts of backgrounds. Some of them are the most renowned preachers of our day. Fred Craddock, Barbara Brown Taylor, James Forbes, Jim Wallis, Walter Brueggemann, from a vast array of denominations. Methodist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal. I heard Vashti Murphy McKenzie who is the first woman bishop of the more than 200 year old African Methodist Episcopal Church. Three sermons a day interspersed by lectures about preaching. Now you might think this is like death by water torture.....but really... YOU might get lucky every once in a while to hear a decent sermon. These people are masters.

We did not gather to talk about church doctrine. We did not gather to discuss burning social issues. We did not gather to work out our differences and to organize ourselves into a common ministry or a common church. We just gathered to hear the Word. (Some of those things did come up, doctrine, and burning social issues). But it was quite amazing to

me. When we just sat and listened for and entered into the WORD of God, how the Spirit and Wind of God could blow. It was amazing to me how united we were in that place, and how fired-up we all were as we left and went back to our homelands.

In two weeks our synod assembly will take place. During the spring and summer, all 65 synods of the ELCA will gather to sing together, worship together, pray, eat, and think together. We will gather to conspire together, to breath together and to be the church. God's Holy Spirit will move through those meetings, a mighty and powerful wind. I hope and pray that we will listen as carefully to each other as did those people gathered together on that first Pentecost. I am convinced if we listen carefully for God's WORD and listen for the WIND and BREATH of God, we will be more united than we will be divided. I wonder if we could learn a lesson from children, who though they are from different parts of the world with very different life stories, can find a language of joy to share. Can we set aside what divides us and let God's Holy Spirit build us into community. Can we let the Breath of God lead us to conspire to service and sacrifice?

The Breath of God is indeed moving. The Spirit of God is out and about. We can hunch down and hope it blows by us, or we can grab hold,

give thanks and go for a ride. It may be a bumpy ride, it may even feel threatening at times. Yet in that ride we will find the miracle of life itself – life lived by the grace and Spirit of God. Life given abundantly and eternally. Amen.

* “A Conspiracy,” by Peter W. Marty, Christian Century, May 8, 1996.