

Wholly Spirited
Pentecost Sermon, May 15, 2016
Rev. Leah Fowler, The Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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

Our children in church have dowels with red ribbons, tealights, and glowing tongue flame cups above their heads. Not bad for a reenactment of the Holy Spirit's descent on the early Christian church-- especially since we frozen chosen Presbyterians tend to do things "decently and in order" and are not quite the speaking in tongues, falling out, fire-breathing Christians that our Charismatic brothers and sisters in the Christian faith might be.

Maybe it is because I am temporarily living in the Theater District, but I like to picture what kind of production the first Christian Pentecost must have been: The Jewish festival of the wheat harvest, known as Pentecost because it came 50 days after the Passover, had called everybody together. Can you imagine sitting, going through the rituals of the holiday, when a rush of wind fills the gathering place? Can you imagine the hairs on your arms and on the back of your neck standing on end at the moment of such strangeness? And right when you are trying to discern whether that gust of wind was the weather or your imagination, noise fills the air. You look around and see people's tongues and lips moving. Sounds are coming out and you recognize the sounds from the vendors at the marketplace. You are so amazed to watch those around you that it takes you a moment before you realize your own mouth moving; while you know you are not speaking your mother-tongue, something inside you causes you to understand that you are testifying to God's amazing deeds of power. Onlookers gather closer. You see in their faces varied skin tones and on their bodies different styles of dress. They are Parthians, Egyptians, Cappadocians, Libyans, still more. Yet despite these different cultures, you see their eyes widen in recognition of what you and the others are saying.

Indeed, it would make a powerful production. My ears always perk up at the description of upcoming shows. Driving into work the other day, I heard a radio show talking about the new Cirque du Soleil show *Paramour*, which will be Cirque's first attempt at a Broadway musical. The story described the choice to switch acrobats into actors' roles. As one acrobat takes the place of a regular actor, "she dangles by an ankle. She is tossed like a rag doll. Up and down, down and up. It's simple, and very beautiful. Acrobatics should function like songs." Shana Carol, who designs acrobatic acts in the show, says, "'Just like in a musical if someone breaks out into song or dance, we feel it is the only way they can express that emotion is breaking out into song and dance; it is essential. We want to feel that with the acrobatics, that we have to present this moment acrobatically, because it is just the absolute best possible way to express it.' A regular musical asks the audience to accept the ridiculous idea that people spontaneously sing

their feelings. In *Paramour*, they sing their feelings... and they leap and tumble and fly their feelings through the air.”¹

In thinking about Pentecost, I can't help but see in Pentecost the gift of the Holy Spirit bubbling up *so* powerfully that-- like with the acrobats in *Paramour*-- we buy into the ridiculous idea that we Christians would have a holy wind to lead us, tongues of fire on each of our heads, and further than that *act* upon that Spirit set within as if there were **no other possible way to express ourselves**.

Unfortunately it is not always so simple. It is easier to stay connected to our smartphones than to connect with the Holy Spirit's whispers and winds. While the Pentecost church is one that welcomes many different languages, we often seek out those who are most similar to us as a condition to walking together in faith. As we are seeing in the ESL Bible Study that is reading through the book of Acts, it does not take long for the early Pentecost community itself-- the group of early followers that once sold all their belongings, shared all the proceeds with any who had need, and broke bread together as each day the Lord added to their number-- to discover conflict and fracture. They had to grapple with the idea of inclusion, and poor Stephen, who tried to build the case for the inclusion of Gentiles into the followers of Jesus' way, was stoned to death by those who wanted to conserve the old ways. Change did indeed happen, but not without costs.

And those of us who would follow the Holy Spirit today do not always find that this connection with the third person of the Trinity bubbles up so naturally. Let me tell you a story about taking the youth group I served as an associate pastor in Montclair, NJ, to a week-long mission trip in Tennessee. Now, these kids were smart kids and considered themselves to be urban sophisticates. Since they already *knew so much*, they had many ideas before they even set foot in Tennessee about what the TN people would be like-- which was based more on caricatures of Southerners and country folk as seen in pop culture than it was based on actual relationships. As it turned out, we were asked to work alongside another youth group from rural Kentucky. Our youth went on a mission trip every year, and the previous year had been to Peru. The Kentucky youth group had been saving money for four years to take a week-long trip in the next state over. Our group had a typically Northeasterner reticence to show outward display of religiosity, while the Kentucky group proudly wore bible T-shirts and sprinkled words of faith into the cadence of their everyday conversation. When we were told during the orientation that each of our groups would be in charge of leading the camp in worship once during the week, my youth-- who are sons and daughters of over-achievers themselves, quickly caucused and decided that they would

¹ Ilya Marritz, "Risky Business" in *WNYC News* May 12, 2016

go later in the week to see what the other group prepared first, so that they could match the expectation.

The week went well, and as our kids worked side-by-side with the Kentucky youth group, they learned a number of things. They not only picked up power-tools and other carpentry skills; they also learned the value of hard physical work. When it came time for my youth to lead worship, they actually planned a really beautiful mountaintop reflection service. During the Prayer of Confession, they asked the worshippers to take bits of scrap wood they had taken from the worksites, and write the name of a burden or injustice they would like to ask God's help and mercy in releasing. Then, worshippers were instructed to throw the scraps into the fire and watch their burdens smoulder in the winnowing flame. Our campers modeled what to do: "I burn greed! I burn racism! I burn injustice!" They called out while their scrap wood crackled in the fire. Catching the spirit of the confession, the Kentucky youth came up to the fire one by one and enthusiastically called out, "I burn friendship!" "I burn love!" "I burn peace!"

"Can they do that?!" One of my teenage boys anxiously whispered to me as he watched friendship, love and peace mistakenly disappear in smoke.

It is hard to be a Pentecost church. But take heart, Christian friends! The Holy Spirit is not a gift we can earn or achieve, despite our most earnest efforts. I find hope that although the Holy Spirit may seem the most elusive, she comes in a powerful, embodied presence. The Spirit comes in wind. In Hebrew, the word is *Ruach*, which simultaneously means wind, breath and spirit. God's Spirit is as close as our every breath. The Spirit comes in fiery tongues-- not used for adding insult or injury to others, but used to tell of God's glory. And, as Jesus says in John's gospel, we already know the Spirit, because the Spirit is in and among you.

Often in our world, we tend to separate. Perhaps it is the Greek heritage of Plato, or the Eastern tradition of Yin and Yang. We see body as separate from spirit. Some philosophies encourage the denial of the body to access a greater spirit nature. And then you look around you and find we separate everything: Earth from heaven, male from female, black from white. Citizen and undocumented. Able-bodied and handicapped... the list goes on, and we find ways to favor one over the other and in the other's diminished role, we dehumanize, degrade and demonize.

But the Holy Spirit came into the flesh of human bodies. It showed us that each one of us has the capacity to house the holy. It reminded us that God is not far from us at all, even as we go about our ordinary, human activities. And that holy presence isn't just reserved for one group of people. It was given to the whole people of God. In Acts the passage makes clear that every language, every nation known to the gathered group was represented in the gift of the Holy Spirit. The whole people of God were spirited; we are a wholly-spirited people.

There is a profound implication for how we treat ourselves and treat one another when we consider that we are housing the divine. Like the enlightened ones in Eastern religions, we can imagine one another as painted with flames above our heads. Maybe we will not break out spontaneously into song, dance and acrobatics to convey our body-spirit connection. But living in a way that welcomes the Holy Spirit in ourselves and one another is a pretty fine intention to guide our lives. Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.