

Pentecost Sunday 2015

Sermon 5.24.15

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-10

Acts 2:1-11

“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf... It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...”

~Jesus

Are you still there—in that room, crowded, stifling? Are you still there, where we left our imagining last week—with the disciples just after Jesus’ ascension to heaven? He had been crucified, he had died, he had been resurrected, and now he’d ascended to the right hand of the Father, just as he had indicated would happen. Following all this, the disciples returned to Jerusalem—120 of them there were, according to the story. They returned to Jerusalem, and gathered in one room where they waited for...

What?

Have you ever waited not knowing for what you were waiting? I mean, waiting is hard enough when you know the goal of your waiting: the grocery store line when the person in front of you can’t find her wallet and has \$200 worth of food ready to go, the department of motor vehicles at the end of the month when everyone has put off registering their cars, the subway you’re riding, which has broken down. But waiting for you know not what: just waiting: an ocean of time spread before you: no far shore to contain it. That’s a whole different matter. Come to think of it, it’s the difference between Christian fundamentalism and Christian faith. Faith has no object and no objective. Waiting as the disciples did: no object, no objective.

But that’s not entirely true, is it? They were expecting this so called Holy Spirit: the *paraclete*, according to Jesus in his farewell discourse of the gospel of John, the advocate, the one called to one’s side, to speak for you when you stand accused. They were expecting this so called Holy Spirit, the *ruah* or *pneuma*,

according to almost every other book in the New Testament, breath, wind. This is what descended for Jesus having ascended. This is what for which they waited.

They knew.

Sort of.

Not that it helps much. It's a pretty vague notion. It's a quite non-specific thing.

Once, long ago, when I first started here and Jesse first started as a clergy spouse, someone asked him what our church is like. A Catholic man, he asked, "Is it Trinitarian?" which Jesse wasn't so sure about. To clarify: "Do they believe in God, in Jesus, Holy Spirit?"

"Yes," Jesse went through the roster. "There's talk of God and Jesus." But of the Holy Spirit he was less sure. "I've never heard that."

The man was flummoxed. "I can't imagine a church without the Holy Spirit."

And of course he couldn't. The Holy Spirit makes the church possible. The Holy Spirit is the means by which the church is at all. So, noted: we need to talk more about the Holy Spirit.

But what shall we say?

Because it's not simply vague. No, worse, it's dodgy when it comes to specifics. The Holy Spirit: it's the breath of life—in and out, in and out, soft and regular, as when you're asleep, that faithful repose. *Or* it's a violent wind, as in the song whose title promises, "This Tornado Loves You," and whose lyrics explain the loving tornado: "Smashed every transformer with every trailer 'til nothing was standing, sixty-five miles wide." It's a voice of advocacy, of *calling*, whispering in your ear when your own words fail or fall short at least—a given thing, for the poet a poem, for the preacher a sermon, for the composer a melody, for the one wrongly accused a word of grace and truth, for the one misunderstood a moment of lucidity. *Or* it's tongues as of fire with all fire's force and saying some collective word of blessed forcefulness: "Hell, no, we won't go," "We shall overcome," "Black lives matter." It gathers people into beloved community and it scatters, individuates, singles you out, and you.

This Holy Spirit: just when you think you know what to look for...

Wait.

Just wait.

You'll get what's coming to you.

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The valley of the dry bones is a good Bible passage for Memorial Day Sunday. After all, those bones were likely meant as the remains of people fallen under attack. They were the whole people Israel, as appeared to the prophet Ezekiel who, amidst the social trauma of the exile of Israel and Judah in Babylon, wondered whether these bones could live, would ever live again. Asked this very question: "Mortal, can these bones live?" he deflected: "O Lord God, you know."

It was a radical message of hope that they could. It was an early exciting of resurrection imagining that they did. Their living again is a literal undoing of death—the process of dying and decaying and disintegrating set to reverse, first with noise, with rattling, as the bones came together, bone to its bone, and then with sinews and flesh, and at last with breath.

Breath. Breath. Eight times: breath. Only once: sinews, ligaments. But it's there, this one mention.

*Ligare* is the Latin word that's rendered in English "to bind." *Ligare* gives us ligament. It also gives religion—this phenomenon that binds people back to one another and back to what abides and transcends. If we feel to have been cut loose, cut off, dismembered, forgotten, religion done right promises reattachment, remembrance, reconciliation.

It's a promise fewer and fewer people are taking up. A recent Pew Research Center poll found that the religiously unaffiliated have grown in number since 2007 by 8 percentage points, from 16% of the population to nearly 22%. While non-Christian faith affiliation has also grown, by 1%, all other affiliations have declined in number.

Lots of factors have contributed to the trend. Lots of those lots are things the church can do nothing about, and shouldn't even wish to do something about. Immigration laws, for example, have allowed for more non-Western people to enter the United States, which is to say people for whom joining a church isn't likely. Globalization in general has widened our collective imagination of how people live, and how people *should* live, which makes a religion somewhat dependent on

evangelism a complicated prospect. The internet has contributed to this further, so that no serious, thinking person can honestly assert that “our” way is the best way, the only true way.

What, then, can we say?

I recently met with a member in discernment, which is the designation for those who are on the path to ordination in the United Church of Christ. He’s far along in the process, at the end stage of writing his ordination paper, a 20-page document about the grand ideas and assertions of the Christian faith. We of the committee that oversees this process: we were to read a draft.

This paper: this is a formal necessity, which is not to say it’s a mere formality. On the contrary, it has real value, even if it feels otherwise on the approaching side of it. I remember my own process of approach. It involved a long period of time resisting it, longing for it to be a more creative, expressive thing than it is. Do we really need to talk about atonement? Do we really need to talk about providence? Isn’t that all just hegemonic piffle—the sort of stuff that makes those in the know feel important while they effectively *effect* nothing?

No. As it turns out: no. It’s a really good exercise to see what you can do with these things that feel both important and impotent at the same time. It’s a really good exercise to play around with the framework of things—to see if it still holds.

This theological clavicle: what if I were to attach it to a femur? No, that doesn’t work. I guess the clavicle really should be attached to the sternum. And what about that femur? It clearly goes with the *fusim ilium*. (And here I was ready to toss it out altogether!) Those ancient, medieval, modern framers of the faith: they really knew what they were talking about—though here’s also my personal take on things. Here’s what I have to say about atonement. Here’s my experience of providence. Here’s where my spirit comes to play.

This man who’s seeking ordination: we sent him home with his first draft. All spirit, all wind, it was. We of the committee told him, “You’ve got to put bone to its bone.”

It’s a matter of proportion, of course. One thing the church can do in order not to bleed out entirely is to get the proportion of our life together right. If we spend all

our time on the ligaments, and consider hardly at all the breath—the breath (eight times the breath!)—then we’ll have nearly no life, and certainly not life worth living.

Some manifestations of the church do indeed spend a disproportionate amount of time on the formal, religious aspects of their life together. Their doctrine (believing *rightly!* confessing *rightly!* reading the *right* version of the Bible and being in fellowship with the *right* sort of believer!) or their by-laws and rules of order and committee structure (nailing down all intents and purposes, all means and possibilities): these are the more binding, formal aspects of religion that, if sturdy, if sound, might lead us to think ourselves yet living.

We here, under my guidance, err on the other side. As it happens, your pastor isn’t too great at attending to the forms and formalities of the faith, can even tend to be dismissive of such things. I honestly hadn’t noticed the building needed painting until more than a few people made comments to me as such. I let years of weddings, baptisms, and funerals go unrecorded because, really, it’s not the church record that makes such things real, but the Holy Spirit.

On second thought, though, I come to think that of course these things are worthy of our attention. The building must be beautiful, must be true to its own intrinsic beauty, because God is beautiful and this meetinghouse is a reminder, a representation (a *re*-presentation) in town, of God-with-us (God’s presence *re*-presented). The weddings, baptisms, and funerals must be remembered here in formal record as a demonstration, a manifestation, of all things being remembered in God’s mind—held close and fast, ever-present. People will ask: people *have* asked: “My grandmother was baptized there. My great-grandparents were married there. Do you have the certificate? Is there a record?” I’m always thrilled (and more than a bit surprised) when the answer is, “Yes.”

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The disciples did something noteworthy while they waited for whatever was to come next. According to the book of Acts, the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter, which is to say immediately prior to the story of Pentecost that we just heard, the disciples decided upon a new member for their ranks.

They had lost one, we must remember. They'd lost Judas—this one who, having committed suicide, didn't wait around for redemption, but of whom I imagine redemption went out in search and did eventually find. So now there was a vacancy among the twelve—a vacancy they apparently felt compelled to fill.

I'd have thought that they could just go with eleven. Or I'd have thought that, so many were they now (so big a group), that they didn't need these special designees—these twelve among the one hundred twenty. Going along with this is the fact that the disciples, as disciples, were students—the word “disciple” coming to us from *discere*, suggesting “student,” which implies the presence of a teacher. But the teacher, Jesus, was gone now, such that the students had graduated from disciples to apostles: apostles, those who are *sent out*, as postage is sent out. In short, for all sorts of reasons the twelve disciples were no longer imperative—neither the disciples *qua* disciples nor (I'd have thought) the twelve.

But isn't that typical? Isn't that just what I *would* think—so informal, too informal. No, of course they needed a twelfth, and they had this time, this spare time. So why not spend getting ready for what would come next, whatever it was that was coming next?

They chose from among two: Matthias and Justus. They prayed and they cast lots, which had them decide upon Matthias. It would be Matthias.

Alrighty, then.

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Are you still in that room—that perhaps stifling, crowded room? Closed in space, unbounded time: what a weird combination: stifling but also far-flinging, confining but also unbounded and in free-fall.

If you are still there in your mind, where we left one another last week (I told you that something was coming, and some of you said [a little ashamed at your lack of liturgical for-knowledge], “I don't know what comes next,” to which I might have said, “Welcome to discipleship.”)? Are you still there waiting?

If so, then please know that what was coming has come. Pentecost is the next Sunday after the empty Sunday that follows Ascension Sunday. Jesus had gone; what was to come hadn't yet come.

But now it has.

Today is Pentecost.

The spirit has come—this which quiets but also quickens, this which whispers but also roars, this which comforts for the purpose of our faithful repose but also whips and goads us onward from all that is partial or imperfect or downright wrong toward that which is whole and complete and thoroughly right and just.

It is here—this of which we can say nothing definitive, but for the reason that it is this that makes possible whatever we might say that is true. Whatever religious rigging we've done and do is to the serve the Spirit who comes near and flees far, blows in through the windows and then blows off the doors.

Ours to fix the frame and then to delight in all the times when it alone won't do.

Thanks be to God.