

Work of the Spirit

In case you didn't notice, today is Pentecost, the feast of the Holy Spirit—the *Holy* Spirit, “the Lord, the giver of life,” who gave birth to the church and constantly breathes new life and power into our lives, our church, and our world.

Admittedly, it's hard to get our heads around the Holy Spirit, and I'm not sure we're supposed to. It defies our definition and control in every way. Even the Bible resorts to images to describe it: it's like wind, living water, tongues of fire, a dove descending from heaven, a personal advocate or counselor. Or it's described with various elusive titles: the spirit of God or the Son; the Spirit of truth, holiness, glory—of prophecy, anointing, wisdom. The list goes on, but you get the point: we can't pin it down with words.

As hard as it is to define the Holy Spirit, we know it when we see it. It's here today, that's for sure. It's here, in the powerful Voices of Hope, in this glorious diversity of spiritual gifts, in the sense of excitement and adventure among us. It's here, in new friendships and ministries and leaders sprouting up, both at this church and at the prison.

We know the Spirit sometimes as a gentle breeze that guides us; comforts us; nudges us to forgive an enemy, or befriend a stranger—that draws us to just the right place, or gives just the right word, at just the right time.

But at other times, it blows like a violent wind, shaking up our neatly ordered lives and established power structures—flooding spiritual power beyond the boundaries we've set in place.

This is what we see in our readings today: the Spirit pouring out on ever-widening circles of people. In Numbers, it spreads from Moses to seventy elders gathered around the tabernacle, so that they prophesy. But it also rests on two outliers, Eldad and Medad, who start to prophesy at camp. *Not* at the designated holy place, the tabernacle—, but at camp, where people are busy finding food, raising children, giving birth, tending to the dying, and trying to keep their tents presentable—or, as they say in prison, “inspection ready.”

This doesn't sit well with everyone. Indeed, a young man feels so threatened by these two unpredicted prophets that he runs and tattles to Joshua and Moses. Joshua doesn't like it either, so he commands Moses to stop them. Moses' reply? “Joshua, you don't need to be jealous, Joshua. Trust and rejoice in the abundance of the Spirit!”

Likewise, in John, the Spirit spreads from Jesus to his disciples, as he breathes on them and empowers them to spread his peace and forgiveness even farther.

And in Acts, it reaches wider still: it descends on an international crowd of Jews gathered for Pentecost. Everyone's amazed and perplexed, as they begin to prophesy in their own languages—and understand each other. But, again, some are uneasy with this apparent chaos, and they write off the Spirit-filled crowd as drunk.

So Peter steps in to explain: “They aren’t drunk! This is what the prophet Joel was talking about: that God will pour out the Spirit upon all flesh, so that all will prophesy—male and female, old and young, free and slave, free and incarcerated—*all* of them will be empowered speak and do God’s will.”

The circle doesn’t get much wider than that.

But, the Holy Spirit’s freedom, and its total disrespect for our boundaries, can make us uneasy, too. For those, like me, who like to know what to expect, to stay in control, to make rational sense of our world, it can be downright maddening. It means we can’t predict where the Spirit will show up next; we can’t prepare for it; we can’t run away from it. And we can’t put in in a box and keep it to ourselves.

And when we’re uncomfortable, or when it’s not our style, we, too, may dismiss—or miss—the Spirit’s latest work. That preacher on the street corner, he’s just crazy. That teenager questioning how we do things, she’s just a trouble-maker.

Or like Joshua, we may get possessive of the Spirit we’ve received. Out of jealousy, we may resist when it raises up new voices. We may refuse to listen, or to make room for them.

So a major part of the Holy Spirit’s work is to open us up, to disorient us, muddle our expectations, free us from bondage to the way we’ve always done things—to make room for the life and love that God’s breathing into us and our church and our world.

And, the Spirit has been busy at work.

It blew fifteen of our youth and some slightly crazy adults way out of their comfort zones, on a mission-retreat, where they could take risks and try new things, and practice being themselves and loving other people who were doing the same. Some tried reaching out, really reaching out, to make new friends; some tried or praying or singing out loud; some tried bun busting, for the first time ever. And get this: some kids cleaned floors and bathrooms, for what also may have been the first time ever.

Back in Georgia, it blew some of us to Arrendale last month, to support the Children’s Center and mothers who are parenting from prison. It drew others to host worship outdoors at our Pantry ministry, or to learn Spanish in order to reach out to our neighbors. It continues to draw all of us into various ways of caring for each other and growing in faith, and into new kinds of leadership, as our congregation discerns how to grow.

Of course, the Spirit-that-knows-no-bounds blows outside of the church, too. It blew around the Forsyth County Courthouse this week, filling a deputy with courage to put others’ lives before his, by engaging an armed man, buying time for help to come and preventing greater violence.

At Arrendale, it led some of you back to school for your GED, or into a year of intense academic theological education (also a slightly crazy undertaking). It emboldened some of you to try preaching or leading prayer—to share your gifts for teaching, music, art, writing. It inspired others to learn how to play guitar or draw or meditate. To trust again. To rebuild broken relationships.

This can only be the Holy Spirit, drawing us together and drawing us out, into new experiences and ministries and relationships, and empowering us to do for God's kingdom what we never thought we could.

So, what does it mean to believe in the Holy Spirit, as we say we do in our creeds, and in the Baptismal Covenant? Well, it has to something to do with what's happening here, in this space today. It means having enough faith in the abundance of the Spirit to draw the circle ever wider, to be open to what the Spirit is stirring up around us. It means trusting that God is making all things new—inspiring new leaders and prophets, and calling us to new or renewed ways of sharing God's love and justice.

It means surrendering over and over to the living God, and, as the song goes, letting ourselves be melted and molded and filled and used by the Spirit that is always falling afresh on us.