

The Holy Spirit is Alive and Well!

Pentecost June 4, 2017

Acts 2:1-21

Rev. Shannon White

Wilton Presbyterian Church

Do you remember the first time you heard a different language other than your native tongue? For me it was in 1965 when I was my family visited the World's Fair in Flushing Meadows. I was five and a half. I vividly remember walking hand in hand with my older sister, who was 8 and making up a conversation in gibberish to fit in! We thought we had blended in with the crowds, meanwhile our parents who were walking behind us were laughing hysterically.

But it was that feeling of being in a place where I could hear many different languages spoken at once, and understood nothing, which still brings a feeling of wonder and a bit of shock to my system. And if I'm really honest, a bit of fear as well. At other times when I have faced that situation, I have felt small and vulnerable in not being in control of what I could understand.

I wonder if that is something of what those who were present at that first celebration of Pentecost felt? Not only were they faced with people speaking all different languages at once, but they faced the drama of violent winds and tongues of fire to boot! They were out of control!

We tend to romanticize the scene when we read the account, but it was anything but magical-- It was more disturbing. Margaret Ayers of Austin Seminary says: "The Holy Spirit proves not to be a quiet, heavenly dove, but rather a violent force that blows the church into being (Acts 2:41-47). That church consists mainly of immigrants, people of different languages and cultures with different mother tongues (Acts 2:5, 9-12, 14). To these, the message goes forth, a message of the coming of the Day of the Lord, full of heavenly portents and prophetic women, slaves, and men."

So just what IS the Holy Spirit? And how does it come to us? The Hebrew term for it is Ruah. The children of Israel knew it as the life giving source...the breath of God, literally. It was found at Creation breathing life into Adam and Eve. The term in the Greek is Paraclete. It is a compound word which means "to come alongside another." This Paraclete was sent by God so that the followers of the human Jesus could move beyond looking to a particular man, a human being, for direction and look for the guidance within as the Spirit prompted them.

In the scriptures there are several ways the Spirit aids us. The first and most welcome, perhaps, is that of Advocate, or Comforter. Praying for us with sighs too deep to be understood, as Paul says in Romans. The Spirit arrives in our lives when we are in the midst of the whirlwinds of our lives and brings calm, comfort and sustenance.

Allison is a 30 something mom whom I met when she was in high school in Scarsdale back in 1990. I had the privilege of confirming her and guiding the weekly youth group meetings of which she was a part. She came regularly. I remember her as a sensitive, upbeat and loving young woman. She was very close to her family.

It's been a joy for me to have reconnected with her in recent years on Facebook.

Allison married after college and she and her husband, Bruce have 2 children ages 10 and 4. They were transferred away from family in NC to Fort Worth, Texas over a decade ago. Their son Alex is smart, funny, caring and loving. He also has a mitochondrial disease which results from gene mutations. Symptoms can include poor growth, loss of muscle coordination, muscle weakness, visual problems, hearing problems, learning disabilities, heart disease, liver disease, kidney disease, gastrointestinal disorders, respiratory disorders, neurological problems, and more. His continuing severe symptoms have required countless surgeries, and multiple month stays in the hospital over the years, one even topping 9 months straight. Still Ali writes: *Alex is the sun that lights my days and my heart. He is the absolute joy of my life.*

Ali started a blog of her medical adventures with Alex over 10 years ago. As I went back and read multiple entries I was amazed-- Amazed at how a young woman's faith could be so strong and steady throughout some of the most horrific events a parent can imagine. Each blog entry had a description of what had happened medically that day, her feelings of sadness, frustration and weariness but then a listing of items for which she was grateful, and then prayers requests, which often included other patients they had met along the way. All of it authentic and filled with love for her son and appreciation for God, her family, and all of the signs of life she sees all around her...even in the midst of hospital bills which have caused a financial tsunami, forcing them to lose their house. Here's an example:

Dec 31, 2010: I certainly didn't think that I would be spending New Year's in the hospital. This is a year where we have had some really high highs and some really low lows. As the year comes to an end I feel my faith in people and a God who guides our days has been renewed. The love and support that surrounds us amazes me daily. I am so thankful for the countless prayers that are lifted for us each and every day.

People have provided tangible evidence of God's love through: Prayer quilts made by a members of a friend's church; prayers pouring in from her many blog followers, meals/financial assistance as the family deals with months-long hospital stays; make a wish foundation trips; This weekend, they are at Disneyworld.

In the midst of all of their daily challenges with Alex, their daughter Maddy has begun to develop similar symptoms. Please pray for them all.

But as evidenced at Pentecost, the job of the Holy Spirit isn't only to comfort us and pray on our behalf. It's also to disturb us into action; to disrupt our lives with holy intervention; to give us a kick in the behind, if you will, to get out and do the work of God! Remember, Jesus had

promised his followers that they would do greater works than he had done after he left. It's an incredible power shift, if you think about it. People didn't have to rely only a leader among them anymore, but the power was now given to each of them...to each of us. The question became, would people take him at his word? Do we take him at his word? Do we believe we have the power to do great things in God's name, and if so, are you ready for your life to be disrupted?

Thank God many do. Here's the story of one congregation which allowed the Holy Spirit to move in and through them. In 1984 homelessness was rampant in New York City. While much public notice was taken of homelessness, what was not noticed was that among the homeless were some who cared for others who were less able to make their way to sources of food and clothing. Members of South Presbyterian Church in Dobbs Ferry, where a few members were volunteering at a Manhattan soup kitchen, invited one such caring homeless woman to speak to the congregation. She made the connection between the people eating in a church basement and the rest of their lives sleeping on city streets, and made it clear that for many the most basic needs were not being met.

Members of the of the church coordinated with this woman and others among the homeless and began visiting Grand Central Station and the streets nearby on Tuesday and Friday nights to distribute food, supplies and clothing, and to offer companionship to homeless people. Volunteers from other churches and synagogues in Westchester County joined this effort, and by 1989 a dozen groups were participating.

Until November of 1989, Midnight Run used the congregation's facilities including the storing of food, clothing and supplies. That year, Midnight Run was incorporated as a not-for-profit organization, and a generous contribution by a Westchester corporation enabled them to rent their first headquarters on Main Street in Dobbs Ferry. There, as you may know, they collect, sort and store clothes; prepare food; and coordinate the donations and the thousands of volunteers it takes to make Midnight Run a reality.

Enthusiasm for Midnight Run has been contagious and, without a grand master plan, the program has grown from the original tiny group to a collaboration of more than 150 community organizations.

You can bet, there were people in that congregation who didn't easily accept that new focus of ministry. But the Spirit works on people to bring about change and growth. A recent article in the Presbyterian Outlook said this: *Mission isn't just church extension. Mission prompts a revolution. And where there's revolution — transformation — there's almost always opposition. While some people are lunging ahead, others are digging in their heels. This is the nub of lesson three — and where the Holy Spirit surfaces.*

This congregation was instrumental in the formation of the ABC Houses and Wilton Commons. Dollars from our Endowment Fund and hours upon hours of dedicated workers from this congregation and others were given to begin these vital ministries in this town as a result of

needs which were seen. Endowment funds and Faith in Action Funds, and countless hours of ESL teaching, driving, visiting and assisting have aided Manal and her children who fled Syria 1 ½ years ago find new life here in the US; And What will our next steps as a congregation be? Where will the winds of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the One who comes alongside us, lead us next? I can't wait to see and be a part of that!

David Lose says: The Spirit doesn't take away our problems or make all things right. Rather, the Spirit instead helps us name the inward hopes, desires, and longings that attend anyone who is waiting for God's redemption. The pain of creation can seem so great and the coming of God's redemption so far away that the Spirit intervenes, interrupts, and intercedes by giving voice to our deepest needs...The Holy Spirit is as much agitator as advocate, as much provocateur as comforter.

This week, CNN had the story of one man's life who was recently disrupted. Amid recent incidents involving nooses, graffiti and racially-motivated assaults, the Spirit has been at work. The Rev. Michael Sullivan of Nicholtown Presbyterian Church, an African American congregation in Greenville, South Carolina recently received an anonymous note.

First, I am white and used to be a terrible racist.

Thanks to Jesus and the Holy Spirit, acting through the Presbyterian Church, I have been cleansed of that. Due to Christ's teachings, I am appalled at my former thoughts and words. I send this donation as a heartfelt apology to the African-American community, as a sign of God's love for you, and as a sign of my love for you as well.

Along with the note, dated May 14th, was a donation of \$2000 which the donor said could be used however the church needed.

The associate pastor said with a laugh, "It's like a miracle." You see, she had been in the process of requesting a \$1,400 grant from the presbytery, to help offset expenses that came with transporting neighborhood children to and from church on Sundays and providing them with breakfast. Miracles all around!!

Has your life been disrupted lately? It's not something we necessarily ask for, nor did those who gathered at Pentecost. But disruption is one of the jobs of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Many of us here in the US have done all we can to try and tame the Spirit which called people to action back in the days of Jesus. We've made it fit into our lifestyles. If we pull on its power when we need a holy pain reliever, we must also be open to its prompting us to use the gifts we have been given to do ministry.

"If you were ever looking for proof that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are alive and well today, and that miracles, just as in Biblical times, still happen today, this is it!"

Friends...May the winds of the Spirit comfort and disrupt our congregational life, your life this day! Come, Holy Spirit!!

Holy Spirit, making life alive,
Moving in all things, root of all creative being,
Cleansing the cosmos of every impurity,
Effacing guilt, anointing sounds.
You are lustrous and praiseworthy life,
You waken and re-awaken everything that is.

Hildegard of Bingen 12th Century Mystic

.