

Pentecost Sunday: Something New
John 15:26-27; 16:4-7; Acts 2:1-21
Salem United Methodist Church; May 20, 2018
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I will begin with an ancient prayer to the Holy Spirit dating back to the ninth century. “Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth. O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy God’s consolations, through Christ Our Lord, Amen.”

This past week as I was preparing for the sermon, I read a statement from a colleague who said that he used to love Pentecost. He loved how the church would be decorated in reds, oranges, and yellows to symbolize the tongues of fire that came upon the disciples. He used to love the celebration of the birth of the church, but now after thirty years in the ministry he wishes he could side step Pentecost. He calculated that he preached close to 2000 sermons over thirty years. Not one of them, nor all of them combined converted three thousand people like Peter’s little sermon did in the book of Acts. He was feeling deflated and depressed. I wrote back to him that ministry is not about numbers. The Holy Spirit worked through Peter in a unique way back then for a specific purpose. These three thousand people from different countries who made this Pentecost, or harvest, pilgrimage to Jerusalem would take the news about the risen Messiah back to their homeland so the church could become established. I assured this pastor that the Holy Spirit has worked through him over the past thirty years in another unique way for a different purpose. In both instances the Holy Spirit built community. Two thousand years ago the Holy Spirit did something new in building a community among the disciples and among those from different countries. In the instance of this particular pastor, the Holy Spirit was also doing something new every day of his ministry, building community among believers and non-believers. Often we cannot see what the Holy Spirit is doing among us until we step back and reflect. Then we may see where and how the Spirit has breathed something new into being.

Yesterday I witnessed the Holy Spirit breathing into being something new in the midst of the royal wedding. Two hundred and forty-something years ago, who could have imagined that a biracial American would marry into British royalty? England and the rebellious American colonies were arch enemies. In both countries people from Africa were enslaved. Yesterday we witnessed an African-American mother-of-the-bridal welcomed into the royal family. And we witnessed an African-American Episcopal bishop, The Right Reverend Michael Curry, deliver a spirit-filled sermon on love that made some of the staid English smile, while others were visibly uncomfortable. There in the seven hundred year old St. George’s Chapel at Windsor Castle was The Kingdom gospel choir that sang, “Stand By Me,” in a style reminiscent of the movie, Sister Act! And then there was the black British cellist, Sheku Kanneh-Mason, who played so heavenly. It took over two hundred years for the Holy Spirit to breathe into creation something new- a more just, inclusive community in England, a community built from the love of two young people.

This is how the power of the Holy Spirit works. The Holy Spirit is not something that we can see or touch. It is difficult to describe so we use familiar images to describe the Spirit. The images of wind, the movement of air, or breathing are some that are used in the Bible. In the second story of creation, God breathes into the human’s nostrils to create a living being. In Hebrew God’s breath is called *ruach*. This term is used throughout the Hebrew Scriptures to refer to the Divine Spirit. God

gives *ruach* or the Spirit to Moses and the seventy elders so they can lead the Israelites in the wilderness (Numbers 11:17). David describes God's Spirit as being on "the wings of the wind" (*ruach*) (2 Samuel 22:11). There are over 350 references to God as breath, wind, Spirit in the Hebrew Scriptures and in each passage the Spirit is doing a something new. Sometimes the Spirit is doing a something new through an individual. Sometimes the Spirit is doing a something new in a community and sometimes the Spirit is doing a something new in all of creation. Jesus understood the power of the *ruach*, or the Spirit, because the Spirit was his divine nature. He physically would be leaving his disciples here on earth to return to Heaven, but he promised to send his Spirit and he did in a very big way. The Spirit came to the disciples like a howling of a fierce wind, *ruach*- the same *ruach* that breathed gently into human lungs at our creation. The howling, fierce *ruach* couldn't be seen, but it was heard and felt. But more importantly the *ruach* did something new. The *ruach* of God gave the gift of speaking in another language so the Jewish pilgrims that came from all regions around the Mediterranean and east of Jerusalem could hear who Jesus is and through this gift God built a new community out of love. The Pentecost story is an act of *ruach*, the Divine work of the Spirit on those disciples who were open to the transformative power of the God's love.

God's transformative power of *ruach* is still breathing on us today, but how open is humanity to the transformative power of God's love? We live in a time of division and hatred that causes so much pain. We argue over how we should care for those God instructed us to care for: the immigrant, the sick, the poor. And some will flatly say that it is not their responsibility to care for those living on the margins. And yet the *ruach* of God continues to breathe on us, perhaps even howling at us. This week it rained, sometimes gently and other times it poured so heavily we experienced flooding. I was thinking about the rain as an image of God's Spirit. Sometimes the rain of the Spirit falls gently to refresh us, to provide sustenance so we can grow like weeds and bloom like flowers. And sometimes the Spirit's rain pours on us to wash away our self-centeredness and to transform us into a something new. But what do we sometimes do? We put on our raincoats to stay dry. We don't want God's Spirit to mess up our hair, make-up, or clothes. We will even grab our umbrellas to keep God's Spirit off of us. We will do whatever it takes to protect ourselves from God's Spirit so that the rain or wind of God cannot do something new in us. How open are we to the transformative power of God's love? Are we willing to receive God's Spirit to create bridges of caring and love between people who believe differently, who see things differently, who are different from ourselves? The Spirit of God is one of love and unity. The Spirit of God is constantly seeking ways to unite us with God through Christ and each other. The Spirit of God is constantly seeking ways to do something new among us.

On May 26 Salem will be 185 years old. In 1833, May 26 was Pentecost Sunday. The Spirit did something new back then in creating a Methodist Protestant church out of a Quaker community. In these 185 years, the Spirit has done something new in this church over and over again. And the Spirit of God is still doing something new. We are creating a new Leadership Team model which will replace our committee system of ordering the church. My prayer is that we will be open to the leading of the Spirit's transformative power as we begin this new journey together and that we put up no barriers for the Holy Spirit to work. Please join me in praying for the Holy Spirit to move among us to do something new in helping us find ways to grow in our Christian love and express God's love to all.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.

Reflection Questions: Reflect over your life, where and how has the Holy Spirit done something new in you? When or how do you put up protective ourselves from the Holy Spirit?

