

Pentecost is a Christian celebration remembering a powerful coming of the Holy Spirit, with wind and flame. Churches have tried to dramatize and make it memorable in many ways. One large Presbyterian church I attended in my Spanish teaching days greeted us with a huge red sail hanging over the sanctuary. I learned later that the pastor there was an avid sailor, so that image made a lot of sense to him: The Holy Spirit coming as wind!

Pentecost also has the image of “tongues of fire” that danced on the disciples heads, a kind of energy that “lit them on fire,” a different kind of fire, perhaps the same kind of energy and light of the burning bush that Moses experienced. Hence the color red, and the red that many of you are wearing. One year, in my early days at Belleville, we tried to portray both wind and fire in the Meetinghouse... remember? Crepe paper streamers, red and orange, hanging from the lights, and fans positioned everywhere so the streamers would move in the wind!

Then there is the reality that the Christian Church was born at that time. A new community. Many churches have brought in large cakes, Happy Birthday Church! Perhaps now, in these crazy times, we need that image, a birthday for the church.... because the church is being born in new ways, with new ways of getting together: more email, more texting, more phone calls, more video-conferences.

Not only practical changes for the church, but theological understandings need some new birth. In a such a small world now, with such a common experience of fear and grief due to a microscopic bug, the interfaith community is finding more common ground, all fighting the same “enemy,” all relying on similar prayers for help. Christians turn easily to the Jewish lament psalms, “We cry out to thee oh Lord, How long will it be, Lord?! So this Pentecost, I find myself thinking about the Holy Spirit as a very inclusive spirit! Of the three parts of our Trinity, the “Holy Spirit” is perhaps the most accessible, easy to relate to as a universal Presence in our world. Jesus himself referred to this Holy Spirit by many names: Comforter,

Advocate, Counselor, Spirit of Truth, etc. And To show again the interfaith nature of that Spirit, I recall a saying from Moses in the wilderness that he wished ALL God’s people could be prophets, that God would give the Spirit to everyone (The more wise prophets the better!). The wonderful song we are singing, Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness, speaks fo the prophetic role of The Spirit, to confront people “blinded with idols and lies.” This is the spirit of prophets and the spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of Truth, to speak the Truth, even if it is upsetting or challenging, such as when truth is spoken to power.

I’m not saying the Spirit is so broad that any meaning will do. I don’t think God cares who wins a football game for example; I’ve felt sorry for cheerleaders, who even in a losing game, keep chanting “Got the spirit? Let’s hear it!” I don’t think the Spirit has to do with loudness and crowds! Surely any spirit will not do. We recall that Hitler roused up crowds in rallies with the spirit of superiority and genocide. There is surely a spirit that is arrogant and evil. There are surely spirits that are wicked, sarcastic, menacing, self-centered, sinister, oppressive, etc. No, divine Spirit, Holy Spirit, is the kind of spirit that Jesus exemplified and has divine qualities of love, peace, goodness and kindness, mercy, compassion, etc. and as such, it is a universal spirit, found in all the faiths of the world. The Holy Spirit has many facets, but to be the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised, it must fill with goodness, not just with any power or energy.

Regarding the manifestations of Spirit coming as “wind”... We know that the Hebrew and Greek roots of the word spirit are indeed breath and wind, the “ruah” or the “pneuma.” What is it that can bolster our spirit, breathe new life... well it may start with the breath itself..... Thanks and praise and awareness for every breath that we take! So we honor and value the practices of our eastern brothers and sisters who emphasize breath meditation. From there we can think of a refreshing breath, even the breath of laughter and creativity,

the breath of strength. I'd like to think of the word “enthusiasm” ... it is like the spirit that talks about dancing, or jumping for joy!

I just read a poem by my great Aunt, which she wrote at 91 years old, after our family took her for one summer week. Inscription: To the Varney's who made my week a joyous one -

“Each day did bring some lovely thing: I said it over each new dawn.
Some gay adventurous thing to hold against my heart, til it was gone.
And so I rose to meet each day with wings upon my feet.”

I see and hear so much Spirit in there..... yes Holy Spirit, divine Spirit.... Willing to greet each new day, to seize the day, with thanksgiving for even little things, for simple joys and comfort of family.

The Holy Spirit is indeed what Jesus calls a “Comforter,” comfort available to all in a personal way. Surely we all have had people in our lives who have helped us, strengthened us, comforted us, and even lift us up to those feelings of dancing with wings on our feet, like flying..... as Isaiah the prophet said so poetically, “They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength: they shall rise up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” Yes, such uplift can come both from the Spirit itself in prayer alone or in a groups, it can come from outside of ourselves... (the Spirit is within you and among you) from dear friends, from a group, who are the messengers of Spirit, the angels of Spirit.

One of the greatest gifts of the Spirit is to truly love our neighbor, to recognize the diverse gifts in people and to uplift each person according to his or her gifts. Paul said it so well in our reading this morning; there is one spirit, but diverse gifts, such as knowledge, wisdom, healing, prophecy, etc. Rather than being threatened by differences, we are called to love and support every neighbor and family member, to see the best in each other and encourage each other's strengths and gifts, while helping in areas of weakness.

The following song memorializes a dear friendship, made famous by Bette Midler in the movie “Beaches.” The singer is grateful for a spirit of love and support that was somewhat hidden or behind the scenes. Perhaps we can enjoy reflecting on such a friend, parent, lover, or mentor... and how that person was or is a vessel of the Holy Spirit, that comes to us like a wind, lifts us up with “wings” into new flight.

Wind Beneath My Wings, by Larry Henley and Jeff Silbar

1. It must have been cold there in my shadow, to never have sunlight on your face. You were content to let me shine, that's your way. You always walked a step behind.

2. So I was the one with all the glory, while you were the one with all the strength. A beautiful face without a name, for so long. A beautiful smile to hide the pain.

CHORUS: Did you ever know that you're my hero, and everything I would like to be? I can fly higher than an eagle, 'cause you are the wind beneath my wings.

3. It might have appeared to go unnoticed, But I've got it all here in my mind. I want you to know I know the truth, 'course I know. I would be nothing without you. (CHORUS)

...Oh, the wind beneath my wings. You, you, you are the wind beneath my wings. Fly, fly, fly high against the sky, so high I almost touched the sky. Thank you, thank you, thank God for you, the wind beneath my wings.