

PE070527 Breath of God, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr.
Genesis 11:1-9 and Acts 2:1-21
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 27 May, 2007

Today is Pentecost, the day we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to the group of frightened disciples. It empowered them to be the church. It gave them boldness and courage to preach to others the good news about who Jesus Christ was and what he did.

The traditional orthodoxy of the Christian church speaks of the Trinity. The Trinity is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, or, in a more inclusive formulation, God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. You might think to yourself, “I understand God the creator, and God the son Jesus, but what’s that Holy Spirit thing?” The Spirit gives us the strength to do what God wants done.

From Genesis, we heard the story of the tower of Babel. The story tells of the ego of the human race. They wanted to be like God: “Let us make a name for ourselves.”¹ They got together to build tower up to sky so they could take God’s place. This sounds like a silly idea to us. We’ve flown airplanes higher than those people in Shinar built their tower. We know God isn’t up there; God is all around. The story of the Tower of Babel was a story to explain all the divisions of the world.

We know the vast number of languages and cultures in the world. Babel is a way of explaining how we got them. The story of Pentecost in the second chapter of Acts is the story of God’s overcoming the scattering of human language and culture. God overcomes the barriers of language and race and nationality. Everyone who heard the disciples was able to hear in his or her own native language.

The story goes that the disciples were gathered in a room, huddled out of fear. Suddenly there was a loud rush of wind and it filled the house. Divided tongues as of fire appeared among them, and they began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.

In preparing for this sermon, I discovered something new to me! I always thought that those high pointed hats that bishops wear really look funny. They don’t protect the wearer from the sun. They’re high and would hit the tops of doorways. They are just silly. I found out that those hats are funny looking because they depict the tongues of fire that appeared on the disciples. The hats symbolize the Holy Spirit!

But, the Holy Spirit is much more than a bunch of old men wearing pointed hats. The Holy Spirit is that which gives the church power to do what God wants done. The Holy Spirit emboldens individuals to act in ways of justice and peace that they may never have done before. I liken it to adrenaline. In an emergency situation, a person can do a lot more than they normally might, such as a mother lifting a heavy weight off her endangered child.

The Holy Spirit enabled a previously-frightened Peter to speak to the residents of Jerusalem and explain what was happening around them on that Pentecost. A few days later, Peter and John healed a crippled beggar on the sabbath and were arrested.² The Holy Spirit filled them and they stood up to the high priest and the elders of the temple and told them that they healed the man in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, whom those men had arrested and crucified. The Holy Spirit enabled those early church leaders to speak out against the powers of oppression.

¹Genesis 11:4

²Acts 3:1-10

The Holy Spirit can enable our young to see visions and our old members to dream dreams. Some of us may be tired, but we're not through yet. Our women dreamed of helping a community agency. They got involved with Family Abuse Services, and last week they joined in dedicating their new Visitor's Center where volatile families can "hand off" children from one estranged parent to the other in a safe and supervised setting. I believe the Holy Spirit was in that process and in those people.

Some of our members have a vision of a community interfaith spiritual center. With the Holy Spirit, we may do more than simply replace a well-worn Parish House. We dream of a place where God's people, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, can worship in peace and harmony. With the Holy Spirit, we can build a symbol of cooperation in a world torn and divided by religious and cultural factions.

The unity of Pentecost is the antidote to the scattering and fragmentation of the nations and languages. Our job as Christians is to break down barriers between humans: to help them understand each other; to share our gifts and talents, rather than dwell on differences.

What barriers do you see among humans that you, with the help of God's Holy Spirit, can break down? I hear talk of "Blue collar people," workers and "White collar people," managers. It is a false barrier. We have to work with each other, trust each other, and cooperate.

I hear talk of regional pride. When I hear of "Southern Living," I cringe. Is it different from "northern living" (except for having to shovel large amounts of snow)? When I hear people wringing their hands about Northerners or Yankees, I cringe. When I hear someone called a "Redneck," I cringe. When I hear distinctions of "red states" and "blue states," I cringe. Aren't we all Americans? Don't we all have to live together? If we don't, we'll tear this nation apart, and we'll wonder what the service people we memorialize this weekend died for. All are important.

You can be empowered by that same Holy Spirit that Peter and the early disciples were. When your way isn't clear, when you are scared, when you are lonely, remember that you are God's child.

God's Holy Spirit can fill you with faith and confidence so that you, too, can do things you never thought possible. Happy Pentecost!