

Holy Spirit

January 13, 2008
Rev. Martha Niebanck
First Parish in Brookline

Reading: Acts 2: 1-19

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

Reading: *"Through the Rose Window: Art, Myth, and the Religious Imagination"*

John Hayward

The sacredness of Spirit...is essentially free from guile. It appears to achieve greatness without those nasty calculations and piracies by which the merely powerful rise to power. Spirit is the greatness in Mozart in the midst of his personal miseries, not the greatness of Hitler in the midst of his self-affrandizing triumphs. ...Spirit is that muscular goodness that Jesus speaks of as "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16), that schemes in righteousness for the sake of a righteous nation, that perseveres against the dinosaurs of the merely powerful and does so not out of hatred for evil persons but out of love for

all people and the real and hoped-for righteousness of their communion and communities. . . . Spirit never relaxes long in despair, letting the evil flow into the vacuum of its own inattention and abandoned guardianship.

In the biblical literature you will find such tragedy as will make your own yoke seem easy and your burden light. There you will find a symphony of nature and humanity in which tragedy is perpetually overcome by new creation, new being, new hope. You can call it nature and humanity; you can call it Jehovah and his world and people; you can call it Father, Son and Holy Spirit; you can call in none of these and devise your own names. Your own linguistic choice will not cause a single one of the ancient characters of the Bible to so much as twitch in their graves. But the richness, the scope of tragedy and triumph, despair and hope, are all with us. They are not there to be simply exalted in their ancient language. (The ancient characters of the Bible) are there to stimulate new words and new language by their perennial wisdom and encouragement.

Prayer: “*A Blessing on this House*”

Rev. Mark Belletini

O Love, may all of our work this morning serve to enhance our common life, and bring both clarity and the more creative kinds of insecurity to our spirit's center.

Like a great piece of music, may our various tones and rhythms harmonize to make a whole, a whole that timelessly celebrates the merciful and always unlocks wonder's door.

Let the practical hold hands with the visionary. Let no solo voice nor unspoken voice have undue sway, and may our reason and our passion keep us true. Truer. Truest.

Love, axis of the universe, . . . keep us faithful, faithful, faithful to our children's children and their world. And to you I offer all the ancient praises! Kadosh, Alhamdulillah, Gloria, Ave Athena, Om, Blessed Be, and Amen.

Sermon:

The ancient people who told the creation story recorded in the first book of the Hebrew scriptures gave us the poetry and the theology of spirit. "Spirit" comes from the Latin "spiritus," the breath, and translates to the Hebrew word for breath, literally, "air in movement," "*ruah*." In the book of Genesis, God breathes on a pile of earth, *humus*, and the first human was enlivened. Mud stood up and walked around Eden. Three hundred and seventy-eight passages in the Hebrew Bible mention *ruah*. *Ruah* is associated with everything and anything that turns the monotonous course of things topsy-turvy. In the presence of *ruah* people have visions, dreams, and make new plans.

When Moses asks the voice arising from the burning bush who sends him to free the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, the name spoken to him and then written down by the scribes for

centuries afterward was all vowels. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner suggests that this name of God is the sound of breathing. The name of “the one who brings into being all that is” is the sound of your own breathing. (Lawrence Kushner, “The Book of Words”)

The breath of God that brings dry bones of a people in exile to life in the visions of Ezekiel is the same wind that fires up the grieving community gathered in Jerusalem after the crucifixion of their leader, Jesus. A great wind comes to those who are in despair and it is the sound of shared breathing.

A Jewish philosopher, Philo, who lived in Alexandria during the lifetime of the teacher Jesus, related to the notion of *the breath of god that brings enlivening ideas* as a sort of being. Philo, living in a Hellenized context, was attempting to harmonize the Jewish understanding of spirit with the Greek understanding of intermediaries. He named this force the *logos* and the early Christian community adopted this notion as well.

The early followers of the crucified Jesus had a problem as they tried to harmonize their Jewish understanding of the unity of God with the notions of intermediaries. After all, what would be the point of following a failed and dead leader? They had to demonstrate how their dead leader possessed God’s community-forming and transforming power.

They had to explain the continuing presence of that power (the Holy Spirit) as related to Jesus and as having all the same powers as God. If the Holy Spirit, experienced by the followers of Jesus, was real, and had real power, this spirit had to be just as much God as the creator and as Jesus. At the same time, if they wanted to remain Jews who believed in a unified God they needed to differentiate themselves from the Hellenic pagans who believed in various partial spirits inhabiting various parts of creation.

Thus, after several hundred years of diversity of opinion, the debate society of Nicea was formed to satisfy Emperor Constantine’s need for a single doctrine. The hair-splitting controversy has continued for almost two centuries over the dogma of three separate and particular persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Our Unitarian ancestors rejected the doctrine of the Trinity as non-Biblical and had no problem returning to the Jewish understanding of the human experience of God being the *experience* of the breath of God, spirit. They believed that Jesus was enthused by that spirit and so were they and so might we be enthused — that is be animated by the breath of God, dry bones brought to life. Our favorite hymn is “Spirit of Life,” demonstrating our loyalty to this third leg of the Trinity. Our more conservative Christian brothers and sisters sing most often about God and Jesus and rarely about the Spirit. How we sing says something about who we are. And still, knowing how we believe will give us a way to join our cousins in the work that we share in a wounded world.

For a postmodern people to continue to quibble with others or with each other about the fine points doctrinal of the Trinity in this age when we face climate change, the challenges of globalization, and the loss of reason that comes with tribalism wedded to fundamentalism, is equivalent to arguing over the relative merits of the Olivetti typewriter over the Royal typewriter. (see Thomas Bandy, “Kicking Habits” p. 37) This

is a dead debate. As a religious people we need a new conversation that is life giving. We need a conversation that “takes time seriously,” as James Luther Adams would say.

Unitarian Universalist theologian of the last century, James Luther Adams, defined the Holy Spirit, as “the community-forming power of God’s love” present in and available to every human heart and mind. He taught that to believe that any group might hold a monopoly or franchise on God’s love was both preposterous and lifeless. Holding onto an intellectual experience or a fixed concept of God (or not-God) instead of an *enlivened sense of the sacredness of existence that awakens a sense of compassion and commitment* (Holy Spirit) is equivalent to choosing to stop breathing in and breathing out.

And so, with the hope that we might “take time seriously,” I invite us to wonder about the experience of this Holy Spirit the ancients described so poetically.

When I have been thinking about this service, choosing the hymns and the readings, I realize that I first imagined the Holy Spirit as warm, cozy, encouraging, gentle, and comfortable. I realize as I return to scripture and the experience of real communities undergoing the transformations that come from being enlivened by “community-forming power” that the actual experience of the Holy Spirit is anything but cozy. James Luther Adams described this moment as “full of dust and heat.” When the spirit arrives we are destabilized and blown off balance, made to be topsy-turvy on the way to being changed.

Bill McKibben, environmentalist and philosopher, describes the arrival of the Holy Spirit as a whirlwind. He observes that whirlwind in the story of Job. Remember Job, the righteous man who lost his children, his animals, his house and his health — a broken man, covered in boils who is surrounded by friends who give him advice about what he needs to do to feel better. Job’s comforters are sure they know exactly how the world works. They are followers of an orthodox world view. Job who has not only lost his family, his possessions and his health, Job has also lost his community’s paradigm for why people suffer.

Job becomes impatient with the pat answers of his community and its doctrine. Job, in the depth of his misery, is lifted up and out of this dead communal doctrine and dialogue by the spirit of God in a whirlwind. He is lifted up and out of his community’s notion that humans are the center of creation. Job lands on the ground dizzy, transformed, brand new and speechless.

God is present in the whirlwind and comforts — not with clarity, but with confusion.

McKibben describes his own Job-like experience of learning what it means be human in a world in which we are not at the center: Hear his voice as he remembers stepping into a hornet's nest while hiking far from home:

I was stung at least seventy times, and it hurt like nothing I have ever felt. And, — I knew I was having some sort of reaction because hives were swelling across my chest. I have a good imagination, so it was not much of a stretch to believe that

I might not make it back home. And yet the strongest feeling, as I ran back down the ride, was a feeling of prayer — the simplest sort of prayer. Thank you God for those birds. Thank you God for these trees. Even, I think, thank you God for the hornets. Thank you that I am somehow linked to all of this. Never before had I felt quite so profoundly the rightness of the world around me — perhaps because it was my first experience as a potential link in the food chain. It was the least separated I have ever been, the closest to a creature. A trip to the hospital eventually erased my myriad bumps, but not the feeling of desperate at-home-ness that I felt that afternoon. (Bill McKibben, “The Comforting Whirlwind,” p. 95)

Bill McKibben’s experience of inspiration that came in the midst of his agony demonstrates the work of the Holy Spirit. His experience was particular and yet it united him to creation. His experience broke down the dead idea of “environment” as something separate and distinct and partial.

And if you’ve ever met or heard or read Bill McKibben then you know that Bill McKibben is a man who lives out of his joyful knowledge and “desperate at-home-ness” of his place in the food chain. Bill McKibben knows himself to be in community with his fellow creatures, humans, and all creation on a planet that is “buzzing, weird, stoic, abundant, reckless, haunting, painful, perfect.”

When we have an experience of the Holy Spirit we are required to respond in community. Job forgave his friends and began again. McKibben, stung and in love with the planet, works to articulate a theology of environmental action.

How have you responded to the breath of God? How have you participated in this community-forming power?

When Unitarian Universalist Mark Belletini (who crafted today’s prayer) explains how we UUs are a religious community, he says:

“The way Unitarian Universalists tend to put it, love, compassion, justice, and peace are not guaranteed by authority from above, but these are *qualities enacted and chosen by a community of free people who fully experience their ordinary life and feel its ramifications entirely.*”

Fully experiencing ordinary life and feeling its ramifications entirely is not cozy, warm, and fuzzy. Full experience is more like Bill McKibben’s experience of being stung by hornets. When you read the morning’s paper or read the signs of the times while loving what and who you love, if you don’t feel like your hair is on fire, you haven’t been paying attention.

The community-forming power that informs us as a religious community invites each of us to bring our lived experience of this time in history into conversation with each other — not for the sake of coziness but for the sake of our mutual transformation into a people who are alive and not a collection of dead bones, dead ideas, rigid doctrines.

The communion we celebrate here is the communion of dialogue, the communion of conversation — the place where we learn that we are actually quite different from each other and that none of us is the center.

Whenever we sit with the experience of our sometimes painful difference while we also risk sitting at the same table, it is more like stepping into a hornet's nest or being swept up in a whirlwind than like being held on some cozy big lap of a Father God.

In the story Leslie read today from the book of Acts, a mob of diverse people gathered. Their diversity was a curse because they could not understand each other, each locked in their own individual identity. Their identity was solidified, and in a way deadened, by language, dialect, customs, ritual.

And then the Holy Spirit descended in a mighty wind. They each continued to speak their own same language but, enlivened by God's breath, they were able to perceive and understand something beyond their individuality. They were transformed from a mob into a community.

Rev. Peter Gomes writes: "Diversity was overcome by a power that transcended it, the power to understand, to hear in one's own language, one's own accent, regional dialect, *patois*, the wonderful (work of creation). The gift of understanding did not diminish the diversity of that great crowd; the People did not cease to be Medes, Persians, and Elamites. They were not reduced to some vague generality without past or place. No, they did not become less than they were, they became more than they had been, for they became at one with all of those who heard and understood that God was alive and active in this world.... The gift of understanding, that gift that transcends logic and diversity, is the gift of the spirit of unity (of purpose)." (Gomes, "Sermons," p. 100)

We Unitarian Universalists are not merely "free thinking individuals" but rather, we are individuals who freely promise to be *with each other* in our differences to be in community with a unity of purpose. A sense of purpose, felt as close by as the sound of our own breath, sweet as the sound of a newborn baby's first breath, world-shaking as the sound of a parent's last breath, enlivens community, makes dry bones dance. Arriving at a shared sense of purpose will raise much "dust and heat." Arriving at a shared sense of purpose transforms us from mob into community.

Take a moment here and now to breathe together.

Let us conspire to breathe the oxygen that has been produced by the trees surrounding this sanctuary.

Let us conspire to breathe the same molecules that were breathed by Philo, and Jesus, and Erasmus, Ralph Waldo Emerson, slaves and slave owners, and our sons and daughters.

Let the whirlwind of our shared breathing, in our laughing and in our singing knock us off center, make us topsy-turvy.

May our confusion free us to make new plans and dream new dreams.

May we know joy at the center of our singing.

Closing Words:

Anna Quindlin, adapted

So here's what I wanted to tell you today: Get a life — A real life, not a manic pursuit of the next promotion, the bigger paycheck, or the larger house.

Get a life in which you notice the smell of salt water pushing itself on a breeze over [Boston Harbor]; a life in which you stop and watch how a red-tailed hawk circles over the water, or the way in which a baby scowls with concentration when it tries to pick up a Cheerio with thumb and first finger.

Get a life in which you are not alone. Find people you love, and who love you. And remember that love is not leisure, (Love) is work. Pick up the phone. Send an e-mail. Write a letter.

Get a life in which you are generous. And realize that life is the best thing ever, and that you have no business taking it for granted. Care so deeply about its goodness that you want to spread it around. Take money you would have spent on beers and give it to charity. Work in a soup kitchen. Be a big brother or sister. All of you want to do well. But if you do not do good, then doing well will never be enough.

It is so easy to waste our lives, our days, our hours, our minutes. It is so easy to take for granted the color of our kids' eyes, the way the melody in a symphony rises and falls and then disappears and rises again.

It is good to have an end to journey toward. But, in the end, it's the journey that matters.

Blessed Be and Amen!