

PENTECOST YEAR B, MAY 23, 2021

The feast of Pentecost is sometimes referred to as the birthday of the church. When we celebrate birthdays, we usually have cake and of course candles for the birthday person to blow out. The older we get the fun, or the agony is to find out if we have enough breath to blow out all the candles. Well, breath is what Pentecost is all about. The central character of the Pentecost story revolves around the Holy Spirit. If we look at the story in Acts, we read about the Holy Spirit coming as a violent wind and tongues of fire. In fact, the wind or breath is used more often than the dove to describe the presence of the Holy Spirit and in Hebrew the Holy Spirit is feminine.

Think of it this way, the Holy Spirit is about a living and life-giving, unlimited power and presence. It is what is necessary for life and it helps to understand the Spirit of God in terms of air that is all around us and ultimately sustains every cell in our body with life. So, on Pentecost the Holy Spirit imbued the disciples with new life, vitality and purpose to carry on Christ's mission. The Holy Spirit breathed on the disciples and in doing so gave them a new lease on life – a new way of doing things and new air to breathe.

These past fourteen months of the pandemic has also been about breath. For people who tested positive for Covid and became ill, their breath was literally taken away from them. They had difficulty breathing and those severely ill had to be put on respirators. However, in many respects, everyone's breath has been taken away both physically and spiritually as we navigated how to survive this pandemic.

Certainly, we can look at the negative impact the pandemic has and still has on us. Wearing masks makes us more acutely aware of our own breath and for those of us who wear glasses the fogging of our glasses has us literally seeing our breath. We long for things to go back to normal but we also have to realize that the normal we knew prior to the pandemic will be changed. Just like after 9/11 we are embarking on a new normal

I think that's the same thing that the disciples realized themselves after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Life as they knew it without Jesus would never be the same again. They had to ask themselves, how were they to move forward after such a traumatic event? What was their mission and what was their new normal?

In the lesson from Acts we find the apostles gathered in a house, praying and waiting for God to make the next move when a violent wind filled the house, a wind that was unmistakably God. The Spirit moved them outside the house to preach of God's power, and a crowd gathered - people from every nation. When the apostles started speaking, everyone heard the words, all at the same time, all in their own native tongues.

What happened is that when the Holy Spirit breathed upon that company of first disciples assembled in Jerusalem, they felt it as wind, but it was really a breath of hope and life - the likes of which no one had ever known.

Someone once used the term "conspiracy," to describe Pentecost. Conspiracy literally means "breathing together." And, I think that's what Pentecost was – a conspiracy – but not in the sense of some sinister gathering, but as a consensus for good. The rush of wind broke down barriers. The Spirit of God permitted different people to begin breathing together. So, in this case it was a beautiful conspiracy that got underway. The Spirit of God had begun to reconfigure lives. And it did and still does.

You see the miracle on that first Pentecost was to let us hear and see each other and to bless our diversity and solidify our unity, as one global church born of the Holy Spirit. The good news of the Pentecost story is that the Spirit understands all of us. But the real miracle is when we understand each other.

I believe this pandemic has made us more aware of how connected the whole world is as this is a global pandemic. There isn't a corner of this planet and nearly every life upon it that hasn't been impacted by Covid. One of the lessons learned from this pandemic is how a tiny little virus made its way across the globe and is still leaving destruction in its path. That virus was able to touch every corner of the world because we are so incredibly connected.

The question then is how can we use that connection for the greater good? You know Delta airlines has a slogan that says, "Delta isn't flying to over 300 places just to connect us but to show us we were never that far apart in the first place." This, I believe is the message of Pentecost. One of the blessings that has come out of this pandemic is how we have learned to stay connected with family and friends, reconnect with old friends and connect with new people. It is recognizing that we are never that far apart in the first place.

One of the things the early Christians learned was that the church wasn't a building. It's about a community of believers. Too often we have forgotten that it isn't the building that makes a church, it is the people. To stay connected with each other, we had to learn a new language – one of technology – that allows us to live stream our services and have face to face meetings with each other. This time has shown us the importance of every member of our parish and the need to stay connected with them. It has also made us more aware of those outside these church walls. There are people who are connecting with us through virtual worship.

In many respects the church is being reborn. Or as the Bishop of San Diego recently told the clergy of the diocese it is time to do some church planting. Church planting is associated with starting new missions in a geographical place. Even though our churches have been in these places for many years, she told us it's time to plant ourselves once again in the community. Who is in our community? When was the last time we made an effort to get to know them? Yes, we're a building to our neighbors but do they know us personally? How can we get to know them and let them know we are here for them? It's not about getting butts into the pew but in showing the presence of God to the community around us. Letting them know there is a caring and loving community who prays for them and stands with them.

Imagine, for a moment, if we spread something besides a virus across the world or just in our community in the next year, something that would bring healing instead of heartbreak. Imagine if we channeled all the energy we had to put into curbing this terrible pandemic into growing something wonderful. Imagine if we listened to each other, if we had compassion for each other, if we remembered that what affects you affects me. Imagine if we spread empathy.

We do that by sharing not only with our words, but with our lives that the God we worship is a God of love, healing, hope, and peace, and not a God of judgment, spite, retribution, or favoritism? We do it by truly seeing the face of God in every single person we encounter and love them accordingly.

We do it by laying down our lives for the cause of justice for all, regardless of who they are, what they believe, where they live, or who they love? We do it when we insist that every human being—and all of God's creation—be treated with dignity?

The Spirit is at work right now in the church presenting us with new opportunities for witness and service in the name of Christ. The spirit is moving us into a new reality of a rebirth for the church. How will we proceed? Will we play it safe? Will we turn away from the opportunities that come our way? Will we give something less than our best? Will we stay behind locked doors or will we be pushed out the door ready for new adventures? Ask yourselves this Pentecost what is the Spirit saying to the church? But more importantly what is the Spirit saying to you and what are you going to do about it? Amen.