

Pentecost C

May 23, 2010

St. Andrew's and St. Swithin's

Acts 2.1-21

Ps 104.25-35, 37b

Romans 8. 14-17

John 14.8-17, (25-27)

Here we are, 50 days after Easter already. The paschal candle has been burning, vestments have been white, we've celebrated with Alleluias, and Jesus has ascended into heaven to return to his Father. He promised his disciples that another Advocate would be given to them, the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Strengthener, who would be ever present when he was no longer physically with them. Today's the day! And I got to thinking about my name.... how weird is that??

Well, it's because you don't hear of babies being named Gail much anymore. It was very popular in the 50's and there were always other Gail's in my classes, sometimes 3 or 4. Even boys were named Gail sometimes. Of course the only proper way to spell Gail is G-a-i-l and everyone knows that. I don't really know what a g-a-y-l-e is, but I do know that g-a-l-e is a big wind! I have been called that many times in my life, some with affection and amusement, and others not so much!

We've had plenty of wind around here lately; enough to break off one of the crosses from the front garden and we've seen lots of trees and branches down. You might be able to attribute some, but hopefully not all, of that to any g-a-l-e blowing from the pulpit!

Wind is an interesting thing. You can't see it but you can feel it and see its effects, like watching flowers bend over in it, the streamers in our procession this morning blow back through it, and the waves on the Strait are proof of it.

In Biblical times, spirit was translated as wind or breath. And you can't see breath, either, although you know its presence and can feel its influence and certainly notice its absence. In Hebrew the word is ruah; in Greek it is pneuma. We know its base as having something to do with air or breathing; as in pneumonia or a pneumatic door.

In the reading from Acts, the wind was a powerful symbol of the divine presence. That, coupled with the tongues of fire signified the in-breaking of heaven into human affairs; the promised Spirit arrived with special effects only poorly imitated by Hollywood!

The image of the tongues of fire heralds the gift of speaking in different languages as the Spirit enables the community, especially the apostles, to testify publicly to Israel. The power of the spirit evinces an extraordinary ability for all of them to speak in other languages, that is, in languages unknown to them. Imagine it. People from all over the Jewish world, from present day Libya and Egypt to Turkey, Iraq and Iran, were gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost, a Jewish holiday also called the Festival of Weeks.

Seven weeks after the Passover, there was a celebration of agriculture as well as the giving of the Law to Moses. The faithful came with offerings in a time of thanksgiving. And in a strange land, the word of God was being spoken to them in their native tongues. This was not the unintelligible speech Paul writes of as the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, but their OWN languages so that the proclamation of the mighty acts of God was accessible to them in powerful ways.

My favorite lines, and perhaps yours as well, are: *All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."* It's true, isn't it? I imagine we do sound like we have totally lost it to non-believers. There is a lot of sneering going on. The magazine *The Economist* had an article in 2006 in which it quoted Ambrose Bierce, writing in 1906 about religion. To pray, he said, is "to ask that the laws of the universe be annulled in behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy." Religion for him was a "daughter of Hope and Fear, explaining to Ignorance the nature of the Unknowable." As Christians we live in a world that often does not appear interested in what we have to say about the love of Jesus Christ and the life that was given to redeem us and reconcile us to God.

But we ARE filled with new wine, as we share the Eucharist with each other in the most intimate expression of our life with Christ, which is filled with hope and completely contrary to fear. This wine fills us with the Holy Spirit which was given to the disciples as the fulfillment of Christ's promise.

It was not the private property of an enlightened few, a gift only for the select of those with special knowledge, nor was it a transitory presence. This Spirit belongs to a people of God as their shared, permanent property. As the author of Acts, Luke makes this even more clear by his use of repetition: they were all together in a whole house where all were sitting when the Spirit came to rest on each of them so that all of them were filled.

There was a stained glass window of Pentecost in the church I served in Havre. The most striking thing about that image was that as the Holy Spirit descended in flames, the disciples had their arms around each other; because beyond having the Holy Spirit as a gift to us as individuals to keep Christ present in our lives, it is also about the work of God's grace in community. Pentecost is about the birth of the church; when the nucleus of the messianic community was born; the body of Christ came into being. We are its direct descendants.

On this day, God took over a frightened band of Jesus' followers, huddled in an upstairs room. God took them over, transformed them into a cohesive unit and sent them out to boldly proclaim the Kingdom of God through Christ. At the close of that day so long ago, more than 3000 were welcomed into the fellowship as believers.

Holy breath creates a living church and we can feel its powerful presence among us. Both breath and the wind are invisible and this is a way of talking about the mystery of God. The wind and breath of God cannot be seen; we don't see God directly but as Jesus tells Philip in John's gospel, whoever has seen him has seen God. And now the Holy Spirit will teach us everything and remind us of all that Jesus has said and done.

When Jesus ascended, he was set free to be known to us at all times and in all places, not only to those who experienced his life directly 2000 years ago. That universal availability and power is

now the work of the Spirit. In all the places of breath and wind, the church is enlivened through the power of the resurrection. This Spirit, this breath, is indeed something God lends to us. Apart from God's breath we are but dust. In order to create us in the beginning, God breathed into the dust of the earth. Ruah. Pneuma. G-a-l-e.

Breath is a sign and source of life. The image of the living God breathing life into the inert dust of the earth is a powerful way of talking about who we are in relation to who God is. We have life because God shares divine life with us and asks us to proclaim that experience to others, in all languages and through all means, as we leave our upper room each week to go out into a world filled with many languages and diverse people, created and loved by one God.

Speaking in another language helps us enter deeply into the universality of God's presence through the Holy Spirit. For all time, in all languages and ways of expression, Jesus is in our midst. Feel the wind of the Spirit on your face, the breath of God in your lungs, and the fire of the Spirit in your souls. God is continually breathing new life into dry bones and making a new creation.

This gift of the Holy Spirit was originally given to us in baptism, just as it was one year ago on this Day of Pentecost for Evelyn, Elizabeth, and Elijah Stockert. Our entrance into the church, the Body of Christ, begins on that day, whether as infants, young persons, or adults. Because Pentecost is the church's most visible celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit, it is a day especially suited for baptisms. So this morning/evening we will renew our own baptismal vows in place of the Nicene Creed. Please turn to page 292 as we claim again the promises we have made:

~1450

## The Renewal of Baptismal Vows

*Celebrant* Do you reaffirm your renunciation of evil and  
renew your commitment to Jesus Christ?

*People* I do.

*Celebrant* Do you believe in God the Father?

*People* I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

*Celebrant* Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

*People* I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.  
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit  
and born of the Virgin Mary.  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried.  
He descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again.  
He ascended into heaven,  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

*Celebrant* Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

*People* I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.

*Celebrant* Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and  
fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the  
prayers?

*People* I will, with God's help.

*Celebrant* Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever  
you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

*People* I will, with God's help.

*Celebrant* Will you proclaim by word and example the Good  
News of God in Christ?

*People* I will, with God's help.

*Celebrant* Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving  
your neighbor as yourself?

*People* I will, with God's help.

*Celebrant* Will you strive for justice and peace among all people,  
and respect the dignity of every human being?

*People* I will, with God's help.

*The Celebrant concludes the Renewal of Vows as follows*

May Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who  
has given us a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and  
bestowed upon us the forgiveness of sins, keep us in eternal  
life by his grace, in Christ Jesus our Lord. *Amen.*