

Message for Pentecost ~ June 4, 2023
Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church
“Filled with the Holy Spirit” Rev. Trish Eckert

- Acts 2: 1-21

As I continue to grow into my role here as pastor at Tippecanoe, I’m more aware than ever that we’re still in the full throes of transition – we have been organizing and cleaning our buildings, developing new strategies to inspire more volunteers to join us in our warming room and garden ministries, and we continue to try and learn new things – such as attempting to participate in No Mow May, which was an adventure that we probably won’t pursue again!

I *WANT* last year to count as *THE* transition year – my first year with you all, but I’ve realized over the past few months...NOPE – there is still SO much for me to learn – I’m striving to recognize and attend to all of the moving parts of our powerful ministries while also attempting to assimilate the rhythms of a different denomination. So, as I explored the PC(USA) website, I was grateful for their articulation of Pentecost as “new creation.” This community has certainly been living into a lot of “new-ness”, and I witness us moving into a deeper knowing of ourselves and of each other, which further reveals our leadings and enables us to recognize our gifts and our growing edges.

PC (USA) lifts up for us that according to the Day of Pentecost story in the Book of Acts, God gave the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower witnesses to the resurrection. Sounds from heaven, cosmic language, the rush of a mighty wind invaded the house in which the apostles gathered, and appeared to them as a burning fire. Tongues of fire touched their nerve centers. A power – the unseen power of God – moved among them and gripped them. The Holy Spirit is unseen, like the wind - in Greek, as in Hebrew, the word for Spirit, wind, and breath is the same: the Greeks called it *pneuma* and in Hebrew, it is *ruach*).

Peter speaks the words of the prophet, Joel, who explained that the *ruach* is to open everybody to God’s future. People young and old will dream and will have visions of hope; they will be able to loose themselves from the way things are now, because God is establishing a whole new economy of creation. The Holy Spirit breaks us out of our preoccupation with ourselves and frees us to serve neighbors, loosens our grasp on possessions, and sets us to loving people. New creation is what Joel is talking about. Pentecost is new creation.

These observations got me thinking about Tippe – I honestly have never been part of a faith community as open to change and so committed to serving others as Tippe is. When I’m feeling disoriented (and sometimes, I’ll admit, kind of cranky) about not knowing what is next or how to go about something, I notice that members of this community are pretty comfortable in this “Tippy Canoe!” You seem pretty adept at “loosing” yourselves “from the way things are now.” Of course, our lives have never been predictable, and yet, in order to cope, we often cling to certainty. The pandemic

upended even the most immutable aspects of our lives, reminding us that any certainty we have is pretty much an illusion. I admit, I couldn't have imagined that at the 18-month mark in my time here, there would still be so much more to learn and so many opportunities to develop new approaches because we're living in a world that seems ever-changing. It can be frustrating, and scary, and also liberating! This community remains open to new creation, and even celebrates it! It is a joy and a comfort to know that when any one person among us is struggling, or concerned about what's next, others among us can walk alongside and we find a way together.

Our opening blessing from Jan L. Richardson described an image of us gathered together, breathing together as we "listen into the chaos." Just like the disciples, who were "all together in one place." And when I got inside that image, I wondered, what would I do if I saw a tongue of fire, a flame flickering above each of your heads!? I'd probably run away screaming!

But really, how might we know that someone is filled with the Spirit? What might that look like? All the scriptural images of the Spirit are dynamic—flowing water, descending dove, fire, and wind. When you think about it, we know, at least on an intuitive level, when someone is filled with the Holy Spirit – they are also dynamic - they tend to be loving, they want to serve others, they seem to accept the highs and lows/the uncertainties of their lives, they forgive their neighbors, and they forgive themselves for not being as perfect as they would like to be.

We witness that fullness of Spirit in someone when we see energy, excitement, deep love, service, forgiveness, or surrender. Such individuals aren't just going through the motions; they are deeply convicted, they are in motion, using their gifts as agents of change.

The reading we heard from the Book of Acts this morning is THE text that is provided in the lectionary every single year – no matter what, every Pentecost, this reading from Acts takes center stage. So, I guess that's one thing we know is a constant. ☺ This year, another of the lectionary readings for this Pentecost in Year A (the year we're currently in) comes from 1 Corinthians, as Paul writes to the people of Corinth. In the 12th chapter, we hear his beautiful message about the gifts given to us by the Spirit, and how we, as individuals, are one body.

4 Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, 5 and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the

interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12: 4-13)

To accompany one another, to be present to each other, to remain open to what is unfolding when everything feels upside down – these are practices that Tippe is called to embrace and invited to engage in as we continue to build community within and beyond the walls of our church.

The Apostle Paul's beautiful words raise questions for me: What are my gifts? What are your gifts? What are our gifts? How might we, as one body, continue to learn and grow, serve, and surrender?

Paul's description of the variety of gifts within a community continues to speak to us now, and it aligns beautifully with the Acts reading, which tells the story of the outcome of Pentecost's new creation: people witness in word and in deed to the risen Christ. Resurrection. New life. The church was born in the moment that the disciples stumbled out onto the streets to witness to God's mighty works in the languages of people all over the world. With the gift of the Spirit, all things are possible ...

So, what is possible for us? Betty and I were talking together this week about Pentecost, about worship plans for the summer, and the look and feel of our physical worship space, which can root us more deeply in what we're exploring and experiencing – we got talking about the “winds of change” – and how scary and dangerous the winds of change can be, because we don't know where we going to be blown next – what will be asked of us? The disciples encountered the “rush of a violent wind,” which is the inbreaking of the Holy Spirit. Even for those of us who value being flexible and practice being open and adventurous, we know the Holy Spirit isn't domesticated, isn't calm or manageable or predictable – the Holy Spirit can be dangerous. The imagery of Pentecost reminds us that we face not only the winds of change but also the initiation of fire.

The symbol of fire stirs our collective memory of the God whose transforming presence has so often been marked by flames. Think of Moses and the burning bush, the column of fire that led the people of Israel through the wilderness, the temple fire that consumed the sacrificial offerings. “For the Lord your God is a devouring fire,” we hear in Deuteronomy. In contemporary culture, we most often experience fire as a contained, controlled, gentle force. Yet the fires of Pentecost are not the tame flames of birthday candles or a cozy winter's hearth; the fires of Pentecost are a sign of the God who resists our every attempt to domesticate the divine and to control how the holy will work.

For the followers of Jesus, the day of Pentecost becomes an occasion of profound initiation. With the gift of spirit and flame, the community that Jesus had formed is now fired, prepared, propelled into a new stage of its journey. Like a vessel in the furnace of a kiln, the followers of Jesus receive the transformation they need. They are no longer a group of believers but rather a catalyzed community, a body that, enlivened by the Spirit, will endure and continue the work of Christ.

As those followers knew, we can't always plan our moments of initiation. If we cannot control God, it follows that we cannot control the ways that God beckons or, sometimes, seemingly flings us across a new threshold. I have often experienced in these 18 months feeling pushed, pulled, and prodded by the Divine! We can work to make ourselves available when it happens, but we don't always get to choose our initiations.

I invite you to listen to this powerful description of initiation, according to the writer, Kim Chernin, from her book, "Reinventing Eve," - consider how it connects with some of your own experiences, and then we'll reflect on a few queries before entering a few minutes of shared quiet. Chernin writes:

Initiation is not a predictable process. It moves forward fitfully, through moments of clear seeing, dramatic episodes of feeling, subtle intuitions, vague contemplative states. Dreams arrive, bringing guidance we frequently cannot accept. Years pass, during which we know that we are involved in something that cannot easily be named. We wake to a sense of confusion, know that we are in dangerous conflict, cannot define the nature of what troubles us. All change is like this. It circles around, leads us a merry chase, starts us out/ it seem/ all over again from where we were in the first place. And then suddenly, when we least expect it, something opens a door, discovers a threshold, shoves us across.

At Pentecost, initiation occurred not only at the individual level ("and a tongue rested on each of them") but also at the corporate level. The outpouring of the Spirit upon the whole community reminds us that we are not on an individual journey but a shared one. God calls us, compels us, to attend to the Spirit in one another.

The celebration of Pentecost beckons us to keep breathing. It challenges us to keep ourselves open to the Spirit who seeks us. The Spirit that, in the beginning, brooded over the chaos and brought forth creation; the Spirit that drenched the community with fire and breath on the day of Pentecost: this same Spirit desires to dwell within us and among us. Amidst the brokenness and chaos and pain that sometimes come with being in community, the Spirit searches for places to breathe in us, to transform us, to knit us together more deeply and wholly as the body of Christ, and to send us forth into the world.

As we contemplate the significance of Pentecost, I invite you to consider:

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What occasions of initiation do you remember?
 - Sought or unbidden, how did those experiences alter you, transform you, change who you are in this world?
 - How did they deepen your understanding of yourself, your community, and how God desires to breathe through you?
- How do you continue to open yourself to the work of the Spirit in you and in those around you?