

Reflection for Pentecost Sunday
May 31, 2020
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Scripture Readings

Acts 2:1-11

1 Cor 12:3-7, 12-13

John 20:19-23

Pentecost in the time of COVI-19:

When every breath can be dangerous.

When every interaction with a person not wearing a mask is threatening.

When the whole world is holding its collective breath: When will this be over?

And if it goes on and on ... what then?

I think that we all have had times when the “synchronicity of the Spirit” has led us to the most appropriate and moving Scripture text exactly when we need it. So is with this year’s Pentecost readings in which Acts describes a “powerful wind” and in the text from the Gospel of John Jesus “breathes” on the disciples. Next year’s Pentecost readings do not mention wind and breath.

Earlier in John’s Gospel, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit (Jn 3:8). The COVID19 wind is blowing everywhere ... as is the Spirit of God.

In this “time like no other” suddenly the most “normal” actions are fraught with anxiety. Our natural instinct to hug or shake hands with someone is now dangerous. The wind that has swept through our world is not the Spirit of God but a natural phenomenon, a virus—so tiny we cannot see it but it can find a home in us.

The writer of Acts tells us that the apostles (and surely others) heard “a powerful wind from heaven” that must have startled and frightened them—much like a tornado coming very close. But it was not the force of nature but the Holy Spirit that immediately began to transform those gathered together.

The wind of the Spirit that filled that house is, we believe, is a transforming wind for us today. It is sweeping away old certainties about what is important—not financial security (though some degree is essential), but relationships. We are discovering that the powerful image of the Body of Christ is real in new ways as we learn how to live the Gospel in the age of the pandemic.

In the Gospel text breath becomes very personal since Jesus “breathed” on the disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” John tells us that the first action of the Spirit is forgiveness—of sins, of wrong-doing. Today that Spirit empowers us to ask forgiveness for our ecological sins as a human community. In many ways we knew not what we were doing—until we could not do it any longer. Something of nature—a virus—has slowed down the whole world and as we shelter in place now, there is time to reflect on how my/our actions have injured creation.

It has been remarked that the restrictions on human behavior that we all now live with—working from home, driving very little, flying not at all—are welcome gifts to the natural world. Dirty bodies of water are now cleaner; whales are no longer threatened by ships; animals come and frolic in parks; the air is much cleaner. So COVID19 is paradoxically a breath of life to creation even as it is the harbinger of death to so many in every part of the world.

When Jesus “breathes” on us—on the whole world—we receive the Spirit as a transforming presence. Many people have said, “Life will never be the same again.” That is true—there is no going back to what was “normal” just a few months ago.

What is our experience of this “new” breath? When someone actually breathes in our face it is usually uncomfortable—they are too close. But this Breath is a healing breath: of our own personal brokenness and pain, of the social sins of our world and the Church, of the various ways we now realize more clearly that we live in a fractured world of poverty and structural injustice.

This Breath of the Spirit is a deepening of faith, hope and love:

Faith: we are not alone—we are in God and in one another.

Hope: what we are experiencing today is not the “last word” of what will be but trust that in the Spirit we will grow in new and unexpected ways.

Love: a deeper realization that love—even though we are not physically present with those we love—has no boundaries—ever.

The text from Acts tells us that immediately after the assembly received the Spirit, they began to preach to people from all over the Roman Empire about “the marvels of God.” I don’t think anyone would name COVID19 as a marvel. But this Pentecost, as is every Pentecost, is an experience of empowerment in and through the Spirit. What “marvels” can we speak of today? And to whom will we speak?

Today, we pray that the Spirit as powerful wind and gentle breath will transform the human community in ways we cannot yet imagine.