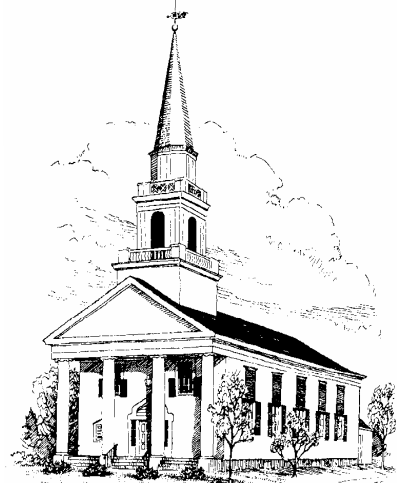


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from May 27, 2007
Rev. Barbara J. Libby
“Filled with the Holy Spirit”

Scriptures:
Genesis 11:1-9
Acts 2:1-21



Does any one birthday of yours stand out, above all others, in your memory? Can you remember a birthday when something about that day just made it the best birthday you ever had? I can remember a birthday celebration (a long time ago now) when I turned 11 years old. It was a day when my family (my mother, father and my 2 brothers—one three years older and one three years younger—all drove together from our home in Concord, New Hampshire up into White Mountains for the day.

It was a cool and windy October day—the trees were all decked out in their fall array. We stopped for lunch at a small lake (called Echo Lake) that stands at the base of that now crumbled (but once famous) New Hampshire image in stone called The Old Man in the Mountain. One of the fascinations for us as kids was that, the way in which the lake was situated, one could speak and the words would echo back and forth across the mountain basin, hence its name—Echo Lake. I remember receiving a wonderful hand puppet of Lamby Pie as one of the gifts that day. I remember that we had a cake at the picnic table, where the wind kept trying hard to blow the candles out before I could make a wish.

But I also realize all these years later that somehow, that day represents for me some sort of best birthday ever in my memory! I don't really know exactly why. I can't quite put my finger on what made it so special but I do remember it as a day that was filled with a special-ness that defies all rational understanding. It was most surely one of those special “family days” where we were all together and enjoying each other's company, when the stars all seemed aligned “right”. It was my best birthday ever and it was a day simply devoted to family and togetherness and to celebration and to sharing time.

This morning we heard in our reading from Acts about such an extraordinary day in the life of the disciples and a large group of folks who came to belief that day in Jerusalem. That Pentecost day had probably started out as a normal holiday, a harvest festival day in the Jewish calendar. This “normal” day turned into a totally unique and unusual day—a birthday in fact, marked by strange and extraordinary events which must have made it stand out above most other days.

The gift of the Holy Spirit in a new way (that “thing” that blew into each of the lives present that day) has got to be the best birthday present ever! The gift of the Holy Spirit, which danced above their heads like tongues of fire and then blew through the air all around them must have been unlike any gift they had ever received before. The images that Luke used to describe this gift are wind and fire, both used traditionally as symbols for God's presence and activity within creation. Luke even uses the same word for spirit as was used in the creation accounts—*ruach*—which means “spirit”, “wind”, and “breath”. God's spirit isn't new on Pentecost but we celebrate on this day that God's spirit was experienced in a new way beginning on this day.

The gift of the Holy Spirit filled the disciples with such an amazing power that, all at once, they were able to “speak in other languages, as the spirit gave them ability.” (Acts 2: 4b) The disciples were “empowered”, “inspired” on Pentecost—God-filled, if you will, so that they could go out into the world. Now that’s a birthday present to remember!

Before the day was over, the church community had grown from one hundred and twenty folks to more than 3,000 people!

Shy people had become bold, scared people had become gutsy, and lost people had found a sure sense of direction. Disciples who had not believed themselves capable of tying their own sandals without Jesus discovered abilities within themselves they never knew they had ... they had sucked in God’s own breath and they had been transformed by it.

The Holy Spirit had entered into them the same way it had entered into Mary, the mother of Jesus, and for the same reason. It was time for God to be born again—not in one body this time but in a body of believers who would receive the breath of life from their Lord and pass it on, using their own bodies to distribute the gift.” (p. 144, Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon, “The Gospel of the Holy Spirit” in Home by Another Way.)

On this Pentecost Sunday each year, we celebrate and recognize God’s presence with us AND we call this day the birthday of the Christian church. After this first Pentecost event, the Christian church did start to expand beyond the borders of Jerusalem and began to spread around the world.

Throughout the 50 days since Easter we have been celebrating the power of the Holy Spirit at work among the disciples in weekly readings from book of Acts. One could say that Acts is really a book about the power of the Holy Spirit at work. Some even call the book of Acts a Gospel of the Holy Spirit. (Taylor, p. 145)

Today we not only remember that first arrival of the Holy Spirit; we also celebrate this day each year as a reminder of the ongoing ways and current evidence that the Holy Spirit is alive and well and moving amongst us still.

Our world today is bleeding because of the towers of Babel we still keep building. Pentecost is the Christian response to that confusion and conflict. Our faith gives us the understanding and the courage to contribute the muscle and the sweat to make a difference in this world and to encourage communication across whatever lines of division there might be. Pentecost reminds us that it is up to us to do something with the power of the spirit within us.

On that first extraordinary Pentecost day God unleashed the good news to the world as well as giving specific power and authority that enabled the Christian community to grow and build up a body of men and women who would invite people to Christ all around the globe. On this Pentecost we consider the way that the same Holy Spirit moves among gathered believers both here in Mystic, Connecticut as well as in communities of faith around the world. This same Holy Spirit fills each of us with new inspiration. This same Holy Spirit gives us new and renewed energy when we need it most. This same Holy Spirit inspires us, sustains us and supports each of us on our faith journeys throughout our lives on this earth.

The story of Pentecost tells us about the best birthday present ever for the church—the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a story which tries to put into words that extraordinary moment when Christ’s followers became aware that God was actively moving in their midst, in a new way and as a new presence.

Jesus had been crucified, he had died on the cross and then, three days later, he had been resurrected and seen by the disciples. Jesus, as the Christ, had been with them a little while and then he had ascended into heaven. Although some of them had experienced him with them shortly after his death, on Pentecost they all knew that something new had entered into them. On Pentecost they became aware that something new was present with them—that a new advocate, a comforter, a new spirit had come upon them as Jesus had promised. This spirit empowered them and energized them and helped “inspire” them so they could move out into the future.

The important thing about this gift was that the gift of the Holy Spirit was not just offered as a personal “prize” or something for folks to claim as a personal possession.

The gift of the Holy Spirit offers an ideal example ... The gifts of God enable us to be God's persons for others, agents of God's grace in a hurting and broken world. The events on the day of Pentecost clearly reflect this purpose. The gift of tongues ... is given so that those of other languages might know God.” (p. 169 the Upper Room Disciplines)

When the disciples received the gift of the Holy Spirit, it was not theirs alone to keep tucked away, hidden, for their private use. The Holy Spirit was gifted to us from the very start as something to be shared generously and lavishly with others. Even as we remember and acknowledge the first Pentecost, when the church became newly self-aware, we also recognize and celebrate the ongoing presence of the Spirit with us as we live and move in our church and in our world today.

As a church in a transitional time, Mystic Congregational Church knows something about the power of the Holy Spirit in our midst. We are a church in the midst of a time of change and we each experience such a time in a wide variety of ways. Throughout it all, we are also God's people, open to the inspiration and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. We are a people who dream dreams and have visions of a future which is not as yet entirely clear or certain but we trust will hold great things for Mystic Congregational Church.

Like those first disciples in Jerusalem on that first Pentecost day we, too, on this Pentecost day, are reminded to remain open to God's Spirit moving among us. We need to listen carefully for God's instruction and God's guidance on this journey through this in-between time that we are walking together.

One contemporary preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, says this about the presence and power of the Holy Spirit:

What happens between us when we come together to worship God is that the Holy Spirit swoops in and out among us, knitting us together through the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, the breaths we breathe. It can happen with two people and it can happen with two thousand people. It can scare us or comfort us, confuse us or clarify things for us ... (p. 142, B. B. Taylor) ... asking for an experience of the Holy Spirit is only half the equation. The other half is recognizing it when it comes ... (p. 146, B. B. Taylor)

On Pentecost the disciples became apostles sent out into the world. On this day we are reminded again that the mission of the church is delegated to each and every member of the church. We are all invited to become active participants in God's mission to the world, empowered by the Holy Spirit. When we say, “Come, Holy Spirit, come,” we need to mean it because that Spirit is here for the asking. The Holy Spirit is here to empower each of us to act in the world. May we be ready to go out filled with the power of the Spirit to discover our place in God's divine love and mission to the world.

Let me share this story:

One windy day in springtime, little four-year old Rachel asked her mother, "Mommy, can I go outside and dance with the wind?"

Mom wasn't really paying much attention but she nodded and said, "Sure, Rachel, go out and have fun."

The little girl put on a sweater and pulled the porch door open.

She walked into the wind's embrace and there she began to dance with the wind.

... twirling and pirouetting and swirling dizzily. She danced perfectly in step with that swirling, mighty spirit's wind...

She plie-ed and she curtsied, matching her moves to her unseen partner—totally trusting and exhilarated by the spirit's wind she trusted more than any other..

May we go and do likewise. Amen.