

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from May 31, 2009

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“Earth, Wind and Fire”

Scriptures:

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Acts 2:1-21



I think it's safe to say that most humans would love to have the capacity to be in more than one place at one time. We hear busy people talk about their calendar conflicts and yearn aloud for personal clones to send out to meet their multiple-sited obligations. But even if you're not one of those over-scheduled folks, I think most of us can agree that it would be oh-so helpful, if not really, really cool to be able to be in two places at once.

That's why I love Four Corners. I've never been there, but I look forward to the day when I can stand on that spot in the western United States where four state borders meet at the same point. Anyone care to name the 4 states? Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico. So you can place each of your two feet and then each of your two hands down in this one spot and be in four places at once! The terrain, the weather, the temperature, wind velocity, sunshine, rainfall are all exactly the same, yet it's four different places, four different states.

But, of course, it's because we humans put the lines there, right? We say it is four different places, when it's really not. We can do it anywhere really. Our usher back there can straddle the line between the sanctuary and the narthex and be in two places at once. Or we could put one foot in the library and one out in the hallway and be in two places at once. The possibilities are endless, but we know that, really, we have manufactured the demarcations ourselves.

That's probably why when God appears to humans on earth, it is often as wind or fire or, as in the case of our reading this morning, both. In Genesis, a wind of God swept over the waters at the beginning of creation. The Lord descended upon Mount Sinai in fire. God came to Moses by way of a burning bush. Wind and fire do not recognize our human boundaries. Tornados cross our state lines. Wildfires know not the difference between California and Oregon or Nevada. When I listen to the local weather report in the morning, it's for New London County and Eastern Rhode Island. Wind and fire pay no attention to our human boundaries.

So we have this morning the Holy Spirit descending upon the apostles with “a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.” And “divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them,” and “all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages.” With the arrival of the Holy Spirit in the form of

uncontainable wind and fire comes the ability to cross the very difficult human boundary of language, to understand and to be understood. We are told the crowd is bewildered, amazed, astonished. They all gather at the hearing of this sound and then ask, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?”

[Now, just a slight pause here to remind us about the general view of Galileans at that time. Remember those who skeptically said of the amazing Jesus – can anything good come out of Galilee? This is a place and a people not held in very high regard by city folk in Jerusalem...] “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” Of course, this incredible sound of wind, this miracle of the appearance of the Spirit, is one thing, but what may be even more surprising to the crowd is that it emanates from a group of Galileans!

Like the wind and the fire, the Spirit of God cannot be contained. We may try to harness the wind, and fight destructive fires, but the Spirit of God transcends all of it: the state lines, the national languages, the vast oceans, the insurmountable mountain ranges, our demarcations and divisions of every kind. The Spirit of God moves wherever it wills.

Perhaps one of my favorite stories of the transcendence of the Spirit of God over human-drawn lines occurred on a Christmas Eve during World War I, December, 1914 in Flanders, astride the borders of Belgium and France, a story familiar to many now. Stanley Weintraub in his book *Silent Night* describes the unofficial spontaneous Christmas truce between the Germans and the British and their respective allies, along the front lines, when out of the worst of war conditions, soldiers on both sides stopped to sing carols, bury their dead, and share food parcels from home. They climbed up from the trenches to meet in the “No Man’s Land” between them and they exchanged gifts and ate and drank together and sang *Silent Night*. Described as a fragile and temporary truce, it has been recorded as an extraordinary moment in human history, fueled, I’m sure, by the Holy Spirit who knows no bounds.

In January 2008 I stood very close to two places at once as I crossed back and forth over the U.S.-Mexican border in Douglas, Arizona and Nogales, Mexico. I participated in a seminary course entitled “Border Crossings”, the aim of which was to teach us about immigration issues at our border with Mexico from as many perspectives as possible. I need only tell you this morning that it is a very complex matter involving many constituencies. We visited and interviewed many representing most of the constituencies, and as seminary students, most of us looking towards local parish ministry, we were most interested in the activities of the local churches there. We spent one morning in dialogue with a local pastor there whose congregation consisted of slices of all those constituencies. U.S. ranchers with property on the border, U.S. Border Patrol agents, activists on all sides of the question, humanitarian workers, documented migrant workers and undocumented migrant workers. Just a few miles outside of their church on any given day, the Arizona desert shares many of the conditions we might expect to see in a war zone. Fences and barbed wire, a place where bodies of men, women and children have been found in the thousands over the years in failed attempts to cross that desert, uniformed, armed agents in vehicles trying to do their job of picking up the dehydrated faces they find wandering or hiding.

Yet, inside that church, all the players meet in the same sanctuary every Sunday, praying

together and worshipping God in English, in Spanish. The minister there knows the status of most and holds the tension in his heart, attempting to follow Jesus in his humanitarian leadership efforts and welcoming all into their sacred space. He shared with us the most poignant moment he had experienced since he had begun his ministry there. Fighting back tears he told us of a Communion Sunday following a harrowing week of death in their community. At this point I honestly don't remember if it was a murder of a U.S. border patrol agent or a Mexican migrant, because we heard stories of both, but grief was deep and tensions were high. In church, they distributed Communion by intinction that Sunday with several stations in the front of the church. As the lines of people came forward to receive, the pastor told us he will never forget looking over and seeing one of the undocumented Mexican migrants in his church tenderly offering the Communion bread to a U.S. officer in the border patrol. Body of Christ.

The Holy Spirit comes in uncontrollable wind and fire, and the Holy Spirit comes in boundless love. Love that transcends, love that rises above the divisions we have created, love that has the infinite potential to heal. Love that can make all ground holy ground, love that can enter into all places at once, without regard to the lines we've drawn. Through the love of God, and the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus and his eternal gift of the Holy Spirit, we are granted a glimpse of God's view. We get to stand in two places at once: in our hurting, broken earthly realm where we long for the healing and peace of God, which is not yet complete, *and* in the heavenly realm of God which has begun to break through in our midst, parts of which are already here.

Pentecost marks the birth of God's church on earth and we celebrate today the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, granting them the gifts to proclaim the gospel, to baptize all nations to the ends of the earth. On this birthday, on this anniversary of the birth of our church, may we remember that the Holy Spirit appears in unlikely places through unlikely people: through coarse Galileans who become multi-lingual, or through a German soldier's boot filled with chocolates and thrown over a muddy battle line, or in the communion of two very different children of God in the desert at Jesus' banquet. Through God's grace and the help of the Holy Spirit, may we strive to transcend our own boundaries, our own assumptions, our self-imposed limitations. Because we are all one in the Spirit. May the Spirit of the living God fall afresh on each one of us today. Amen.

