

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis
June 4, 2017
Pentecost 2017
Acts 2: 1-21, John 20: 19-23

Last week we celebrated the Ascension of Jesus--when the disciples saw Jesus taken up into heaven, to the power seat--the right hand of God. This was a big moment for them--when they really got it--when they understood Jesus was not just an amazing man but Lord. It was the moment when the puzzle of who he was came together--and it was the moment when God made plain that the way of Jesus--his way of loving and serving--his way of pouring his life out for others--God made plain that this way is how God's power is unleashed in this world.

Just before Jesus ascends, he tells his disciples to wait--to wait there in Jerusalem *until they are clothed with power from on high*. So, today--Pentecost--is that moment they have been waiting for. It's the second part of the story. The Ascension was the end of Jesus's story--and it ends with the revealing of who Jesus is by showing him in the place of Ultimate Power. Pentecost is about power being *given* to the disciples. It's the beginning of their story--of our story.

If you didn't see the news last night, you woke up to the sad news of the terrorist attacks in London. Recalling the attack two weeks ago and the other one a couple of months ago, one Londoner said that terrorist attacks are becoming the "new normal."

While I understand why someone might say that, I find it important to push back and say, "NO, this is not *normal*." "Normal" implies something that you can get used to--something that fades into the background--something that becomes part of the wallpaper of your life.

It's especially not normal for the people who were caught up in those attacks. They are changed forever by what happened last night.

I know because 35 years ago, I narrowly missed being a victim of a bombing in Belfast, Northern Ireland. I was walking home on a nice summer evening--much like last night in London--and a bomb exploded on a motorcycle. I felt the impact of the blast but was not hurt. I literally ran all the way home. But the impact of that blast has lasted my entire life.

I can picture the panic and the mayhem that went on last night in London--and I can feel the upheaval and the confusion.

We have a picture of Pentecost that is pretty tame. But as one person said, the coming of the Holy Spirit was "no gentle inbreaking." On that first Pentecost, the Spirit came suddenly and violently. That's how it's described in Acts: the house was filled with with "a sound like the rush of a violent wind." That's like the sound of an explosion or a tornado. It's not a gentle breeze. It's not reassuring or comforting. It's a full on expression of power that explodes in that house where the disciples are.

But instead of blowing them apart like a bomb, the Spirit *fills* them. Fills them with power. A power that they can see and hear--the power to speak in languages they had never learned. The Holy Spirit fills them with power and equips them with exactly what was needed to have the power the Gospel explode beyond their small territory Galilee.

The disciples were forever changed by that day. It put them on a path that was Spirit-reliant. According to the stories in Acts, the early church did not have a strategic plan for mission but decided where to go and what to do as they were guided by the Spirit. Over time, more structure and order came to the Church but what was true then is still true for us today. We are here because we have been called and gathered together by the Spirit.

Yesterday we had our Connections Mini-retreat--a time when new members and longer-term members can come together in the power of the Spirit. We had a time of sharing our stories--of bearing witness to God's action in our lives--of acknowledging how the Spirit is active here and how much that means to us.

We have three people who will become members today--and I am struck by how important this day is to each one of them. They are different people, with different histories and different faith stories. They bring a variety of gifts--but it is the same Spirit who has brought them here. And that Spirit has been active in them. This is no casual joining of a congregation. Each one is coming into membership with a strong sense of purpose and call--and a desire to give generously of themselves to the ministry here.

I just want to say that I do not think this is *normal*. In this day and age--in this city--it is not normal for people to join a congregation at all, never mind with so much enthusiasm. So, I want to acknowledge and give thanks for the Spirit that is moving like a mighty wind among us.

And we can look around and see that this mighty wind has been blowing for a little while now--which is more than a blessing. Just like on that first Pentecost, we're experiencing a divine wake-up call that God is doing something new in us and among us.

In the Bible, the word for Spirit is the same word as wind *and* the same word as breath. So, just as the Spirit comes to us as a mighty wind that explodes into our lives with power, the Spirit also comes to us like breath. We see it in the Gospel reading today when Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Breathing is probably--next to our heart beating--the most important thing that we hardly ever think about. What does it look like to be "filled with breath"?

The first thing that comes to my mind is CPR. Thankfully, I've never needed to receive CPR but I've given it--just one time-- to my daughter, May, when she was 20 months old. It turned out that it was a seizure but we didn't know that at the time--she just fell down and appeared not to be breathing. She came to shortly after the paramedics arrived and was fine. But I will always remember how desperately I wanted to get that breath into her--so she would live.

So, I imagine this from God's vantage point--how God sees our lifelessness and how urgently God wants to get the breath of Life into us. The Spirit is that breath of Life.

And I think we have this experience--at least I've heard many people talk about it--when we're face to face with something that is bigger than we are, something that is overwhelming, something that knocks the breath out of us--and then we make it through to the next day--sometimes we even have a sense of a burden lifting and some peace--and we know that we have had some divine CPR.

Over the last 11 years, I've learned a lot about breathing through the practice of yoga. So, this is my second image of what it is like to be "filled with breath."

I never actually knew there was so much to learn--or that you *could* learn to breathe. For me, it's been the hardest part of yoga--and the most life-changing--and it's something that has come with lots of practice. But I can tell that I breathe more fully now--which literally fills me with more energy and life. I can hold my breath for a long time--which has no useful purpose other than swimming underwater--but it shows me how my lung capacity has grown. I generally only do yoga poses in a class or at home but I breathe all the time--and thanks to my yoga practice, I breathe more fully all the time.

I think this is another face of the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Through the practices of the faith--through loving and serving those who are hurting--through prayer and song--through sharing in Holy Communion together--through the words of Scripture and the words of insight and challenge we give each other--through silent, receptive listening--through all of these practices and more the Spirit breathes Life into us.

And over time we are expanded just like our lung capacity can be expanded over time. There is more room for the Spirit to move in our lives. There is more room for the Spirit to activate our God-given gifts.

Love expands in our lives--and in our life together as a community in the Spirit. And like a balloon that keeps getting filled with air--it can't be contained anymore and it pops. Or it explodes on the streets. Love hits people who never expected it--and who are never the same again.

This is the same Spirit that was unleashed so long ago--and is still coming to us now--with power to revive us and power to make us grow. Let us live in that power!

Amen.