

## That's the Holy Spirit

The Rev. Devon Anderson

St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA

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Acts 2: 1-11; 1Corinthians 12:4-13; John 15:26-27

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In the years before he died, monk and spiritual leader Thich Nhat Hanh opened every meditation practice with a simple breathing exercise. Here's how it goes: "Breathe in, calm my body. Breathe out, smile." It's that simple. Let's try it together.

You have just taken into your bodies the meaning of Pentecost. What we celebrate this feast day, in all simplicity, is an exchange of breath. That is what happened 2000 years ago in that cramped, upper room in Jerusalem. There Jesus, willingly and for the love of us, let out his last breath. His breath was a breath full of passion and love and life, full of goodness and power. Rather than dissipating into the air it grew in strength and volume until it was a mighty wind, whipping through the room, striking sparks that burst into flames above the heads of Jesus' friends and followers.

The scriptures tell us there were about 120 people in that room on that first Pentecost, all party to the wild wind that swirled and tossed and raged around them. And they breathed in deep, long pulls of breath and as they did they were literally, physically filled with the breath of God. And then something clamped down and the air came back out in languages they didn't know they knew. The large crowds outside, surprised to hear their own languages, were drawn like moths to flame, pushing through doors, crowding in, all wanting to breathe in the wild, crazy, intoxicating energy of that room. Before that day was over, the church was born, growing from 120 to 3000 people, each having breathed in God himself, each having been transformed as the Holy Spirit entered them and changed them forever. Breathe in: God. Breathe out: Smile.

"The Book of Acts," says the theologian Barbara Brown Taylor, "is the story of the adventures of the people who were there that Pentecost day, which is why I like to think of the Book of Acts as the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. In the first four books of the New Testament, we learn the good news of what God did through Jesus Christ. In the book of Acts, we learn the good news of what God did through the Holy Spirit, by performing artificial resuscitation on a room full of well-intentioned bumbling and turning them into a force that changed the history of the world."

I *love* the Pentecost story and I need to hear it every, single year -- if only to reconsider its central question: *do we still believe in a God that acts like that?* A God who blows through locked doors, who can radically change us, who sets our hearts on fire? Do we still believe in a God who, through the Holy Spirit, can sweep into our lives on any given day and *knock our socks off?*

William Willimon is a bishop in the United Methodist Church and is thought to be one of the best preachers of our time. He has written that in this day and age we little anticipate the Holy Spirit. He writes, "we are far more inclined to gather for worship, hoping

beyond hope for words of comfort and peace. We much prefer things to be neat and in order. We are little prepared for a holy hurricane, for a mighty wind to blow in our midst, for tongues of fire to rest upon our heads.” The disciples, he argues, had the benefit of knowing Jesus himself and they expected (or at least weren’t that surprised) by crazy things like windstorms in living rooms and air catching on fire. Maybe because we live by the story and not by the in-person experience, he thinks, we have lost our receptivity, our hopeful expectation of the power of the Holy Spirit to be palpably present and real to us.”

I think poor Bishop Willimon takes a pessimistic view, and I do not share it. Because I’m here to tell you: the Holy Spirit blows our socks off all the time, just as present and dramatic as that first Pentecost when it filled the lungs and bodies of Jesus’ disciples. I don’t think time has diminished that power one, single bit – it’s there, all around us whether we see it or not, want it or not, ask for it or not. There are all sorts of ways the Holy Spirit whips around our daily lives like in heightened moments for which we have no explanation. Or better yet, in unseen sounds and wonders that make us look up in amazement.

One way the Holy Spirit acts is when we are gifted with a sense of a **new beginning or a fresh perspective**. A few years ago I read an interview with a former national government official who dedicated himself in retirement to living fully into his Christianity. In the interview the man was asked: “If you could see God face to face, what’s the first thing you’d say or the first question you’d ask?” And he responded:

*That [same] question was asked in USA Today magazine a few years ago, and the question a lot of people wanted to ask God was: “What is my purpose in life?” Questions of purpose are important. But I think I would be in a mode of thanksgiving.*

*As I’ve gotten older and older, I’ve changed more from entreaties – from asking God for things for [myself and] the people I love – to just being thankful for the blessings that I’ve received. I try to remind myself during each day about all the wonderful things that God has let me have: not only life but also freedom to act as I want to. God has given every person not only life and freedom but also the capabilities to live a successful life – at least as measured by God. Those are wonderful gifts that we have received, and I try to remind myself to be thankful for them.*

When we are able to move, over the course of our life, from need to gratitude, when we move from inward to outward, when we look up one day and realize that we have changed, when things that once tore our heart out before don’t really bother us anymore, when old conflicts have morphed into wisdom, when we discover that we have evolved over time, *transformed into something new* – when that sudden realization dawns on us and takes our breath away: **You can call it anything you want, but I call it the Holy Spirit.**

The Holy Spirit also presents itself **wherever there is delight**. “Rest and laughter are the most spiritual acts of all,” writes essayist Annie Lamott. And she’s right. A few years

ago I found myself suffering from a serious conflict at work. I worried about it, lamented, railed, and cried. I just couldn't see a way out, around, or through it. Because I felt so stuck, I couldn't get to sleep at night, and when I did I'd wake up later, my mind all spin and swirl. I call it "monkey mind." And believe me, there were a lot of monkeys in there! One night I was awake at 3:00 am, the only time when the city I live in is absolutely quiet. It was mid-summer and the windows were open. There I was, twisting and turning -- when I heard a solitary loon call out. It sounded like this [play recording]. It was just a single call. And it was strange because loons don't arrive on the city lakes until late August, and even then, never alone. But there it was -- one, clarion call. Loon calls have always been a holy sound to me. It's the soundtrack of our family summers spent up in the Boundary Waters wilderness. It's the soundtrack of peacefulness and the taste of tiny wild blueberries. It's the soundtrack of sleeping in, and open water swims, and the hilarity of campfire stories. In that dead of night, the single call still echoing through the air, I felt descending upon me the deepest kind of rest, the stillest sense of well-being, the surest knowledge of calm and that things would get better. **You can call it what you want. I call it the Holy Spirit.**

And finally: the Holy Spirit is alive and setting our hearts aflame **in the ordinary**. "And here in dust and dirt," wrote George Herbert, "O here/The lilies of his love appears." I spent the night at church last night as a chaperone for the confirmands' overnight. I had thought I had aged out of sleeping in church basements, but there you go. They were a squirrely bunch -- whose energy was *not* curtailed by three harrowing rounds of dodge ball in Allen Hall. But they love being together and over the past months they have formed friendships and inside jokes and rapport. I noticed that they brought enthusiasm to every activity over the course of the night - walking the labyrinth with the same intensity as playing nine square. They stopped talking long enough to each write a letter to the bishop answering the question "who is Jesus to you?" They took it seriously. They walked interactive prayer stations and then ran around the church playing "manhunt." And we prayed the Eucharist together, in the Chapel, with each confirmand vested as a priest or a vergier or a celebrant. When the ordinary of a youth overnight turns into the intensity and joy of community **you can call it anything you want, but I call it the Holy Spirit.**

The God of the first Pentecost is the same God of today's Pentecost -- as dynamic and creative, passionate and fiery as ever. Anytime we want we can breathe in deeply for a full dose of the Holy Spirit, filling ourselves with all the power and affirmation we could ever need. God is outrageous. God is dramatic. I believe in a God who still acts like that. What about you? AMEN.

Sources:

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