

Life-Giving Wind
September 22, 2013
Acts 2:1-21 (The Message)

This morning's Scripture reading comes from the second chapter of Acts. It is the story many of you are used to hearing read once a year on Pentecost. This year, however, it will sound a little different thanks to Eugene Peterson's contemporary paraphrase: The Message.

When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force - no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building.

Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.

There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world. When they heard the sound, they came on the run.

Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck. They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, "Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues?"

Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; Visitors from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene; both Jews and proselytes; Even Cretans and Arabs! "They're speaking our languages, describing God's mighty works!"

Their heads were spinning; they couldn't make head or tail of any of it. They talked back and forth, confused: "What's going on here?" Others joked, "They're drunk on cheap wine."

That's when Peter stood up and, backed by the other eleven, spoke out with bold urgency: "Fellow Jews, all of you who are visiting Jerusalem, listen carefully and get this story straight. These people aren't drunk as some of you suspect.

They haven't had time to get drunk - it's only nine o'clock in the morning.

This is what the prophet Joel announced would happen: "In the Last Days," God says, "I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters; Your young men will see visions, your old men dream dreams.

When the time comes, I'll pour out my Spirit On those who serve me, men and women both, and they'll prophesy. I'll set wonders in the sky above and signs on the earth below, Blood and fire and billowing smoke, the sun turning black and the moon blood-red, Before the Day of the Lord arrives, the Day tremendous and marvelous; And whoever calls out for help to me, God, will be saved."

May God bless the reading and hearing of these words.

Let us pray . . . Holy God help us suspend our rational certainty about what Pentecost is and means long enough to feel your Life-Giving Wind. Endow us with heightened awareness of our senses of sound and sight. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Like many of you, I grew up in the church. More specifically, I grew up in one congregation – the First Presbyterian Church in Arlington, Texas. I quickly learned my way around the church – from playground to pew. After attending worship for years, participating in Sunday school, and completing confirmation, I was sure I knew what it meant to be Christian. I could tell you exactly what happened during the 60 minutes I spent in the sanctuary each week. Church and the Christianity it represented made complete sense to me . . . until . . . Until, I found myself attending church somewhere else.

Like many adolescents, I expanded my religious horizons for hormonal rather than theological reasons. I will never forget my first experience attending a church service with my then girlfriend and her family.

In a matter of minutes, my perception of church changed forever. While the building looked similar from the outside and contained the same pews on the inside, nothing else was familiar. The order of worship didn't feel orderly at all. I found myself staring at the people around me as they sang unknown songs with unexpected passion.

The sermon was interesting, but it kept going and going and going. Then, instead of a benediction, I heard a second sermon, which was actually an invitation for those present to trust Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. After more singing followed by clapping for the people who prayed the prayer and got “saved” it ended. What a strange way to do church!

I learned an incredibly important lesson: The wind of God’s Spirit blows in mysterious life-giving ways. From that point forward, I knew church was much more diverse than I had ever imagined.

This lesson is one I find myself needing to relearn – or at least be reminded of – on a regular basis. Today, as we consider the Pentecost story and think of the birth of this movement that started as the Way of Jesus and is now often called Christianity, I invite you to join with me in an exploration of a few of the ways the Life-Giving Wind is blowing all around us.

Wherever the Life-Giving Wind blows, the church is about unity not uniformity.

Journey with me into the story. . .

Step back and ask yourself, “If I had all the power in the world and wanted to enable a huge crowd of people from different parts of the world to speak to one another, wouldn’t I just give them a common language?” And, if I foreknew that the occasion was to go down in history as the birth of a religion, wouldn’t I choose a brand new language with a catchy name that would make the jobs of marketing and public relations easier?

While such an idea makes sense to me pragmatically, it frightens me theologically. A shared language from day one would mean our faith is about uniformity. It would mean we are all to be alike – something like mass produced Christians. This “cookie cutter Christianity” isn’t attractive to me at all; it is a poor substitute for authentic Christianity.

Instead of uniformity, our shared story begins with unity. People came together and their lives changed forever, yet they didn’t lose their language or cultural distinctions. Miraculously each person gained something instead – the ability to hear everyone else speaking in his or her own language.

While unity not uniformity is the story of the Way of Jesus generally, it is especially the story of our denomination. Just think of our name: the UNITED Church of Christ. Just think of our birth story – a story of four rather different traditions merging to form a new denomination. Or, just think of our motto: that they may all be one (John 17:21). And remember that we are committed to being a united and uniting church.¹

Today, I am encouraged by a trend in the American church toward increased collaboration. The days of doing ministry and partnering for mission based on church "brands" is dying. The Life-Giving Wind is bringing together churches from denominations and traditions that historically wanted nothing to do with one another. Together these groups are doing much more than they could do separately to improve conditions in their local communities, care for the earth, and impact our global village.²

This Life-Giving Wind is blowing freely and remaking the church on a regular basis. In fact, **wherever the Life-Giving Wind blows, the church is about change not constancy.**

For decades change has been headline news; not only are we told change is a given but that the rate of change continues to accelerate. And yet, the church has often acted as if it were exempt or at least a special case – preferring to change more slowly. We are wrong, however, to think constancy was planned.

If you spend much time reading the book of Acts you will recognize that expansion plans guided by the Spirit are an operational imperative.

New Testament scholar Scot McKnight reflects on some of the more significant ways in which the church has changed in his lifetime: architecture, attire, consumerism, music, preaching, smell, and tradition³. Given such a wide-ranging list it almost feels like everything we know has, is, or soon will be changing.

¹ "What is the United Church of Christ?" <http://www.ucc.org/about-us_what-is-the-united-church-of>

² Greg Smith. "Future Church – More Collaboration" in *Church v.2020: 10 Changes*. <<http://sowhatfaith.com/2012/04/13/future-church-more-collaboration/>>.

³ Scot McKnight. "How the Church has Changed." <<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2012/05/09/how-the-church-has-changed/>>

Or consider this - for a few hundred years sociologists and historians divided Christians into three groups – Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. Every denomination or tradition belonged to one those three categories.

Recently scholars began speaking of four groups, adding Pentecostal. While this new movement was born only about 100 years ago, it has earned the distinction as “the fastest-growing religion in the history of the world”⁴

Who are the Pentecostals? Globally, they account for roughly 1 in 5 Christians.

What makes them unique? They “expect to see God’s miraculous power displayed on earth as a part of normal, everyday experience”⁵ In other words, Pentecost is an everyday affair.

Another unexpected change is the emergence and rapid growth of a new kind of church: the megachurch - congregations with an average weekend worship attendance of at least 2,000 people. Today, 80% of the American population has a megachurch within a reasonable driving distance from their homes.⁶

Yet another unexpected change has developed even more recently: the online church. For all of church history, any definition of church presumed a group of people who gathered together – and assumed such gathering happened in physical spaces. With the creation of Internet campuses and congregations that assumption has ended.

The Life-Giving Wind is always blowing – sometimes as a breeze and sometimes at gale force. **Wherever the Life-Giving Wind blows, the church is about renewal not repetition.**

Repetition is the mentality of decline. Churches that merely do the same thing over and over again are led by programs or tradition not the Life-Giving Wind.

⁴ Douglas Jacobsen, *The World’s Christians: Who they are, Where they are, and How they got there:* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 51.

⁵ Ibid., 50.

⁶ Susan Beaumont. *Inside the Large Congregation* (Alban, 2011), 5.-6.

As I listen for the voices of those who are carried by the Life-Giving Wind I am encouraged by those who have eyes to see renewal happening all around us.

Phyllis Tickle, one of the most respected authorities on religion in America, talks of how the church is entering a new era she calls “The Great Emergence”⁷ This type of radical change is something that comes around once every 500 years – and we are all privileged to participate in it.

Church futurist Leonard Sweet suggests that the incredible power of social media will be leveraged in ways we have yet to imagine to allow the church to “go viral.”⁸ He speaks of the power of the TGIF culture – that is the world of Twitter, Google, iPhone and Facebook. These new tools are allowing people to connect like never before.

Diana Butler Bass is an independent scholar of American religion and culture who wrote *Christianity after Religion*, which will be our topic this coming Tuesday. She suggests that we are now in the early stages of the Fourth Great Awakening. This new Great Awakening is “marked by its insistence on connection, networks, relationships, imagination, and story . . .”⁹ It will include the church, but it is not limited to the church.

The Life-Giving Wind is surely blowing – do we dare to ignore it?

I have been speaking about the church.

The church is not supposed to be an institution or a highly structured organization; it is a movement and a permanent revolution. Most of all, the church is people – we are the church. And, thankfully, the same Life-Giving Wind that empowers the church, empowers each and every one of us.

Amen.

⁷ Phyllis Tickle. *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Baker Books, 2008).

⁸ Leonard Sweet. *Viral: How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival* (Waterbook Press, 2012).

⁹ Diana Butler Bass. *Christianity After Religion* (HarperCollins, 2012, 237).