

“The Birth Of An Inspired People”

Date: 9 June 2019, Pentecost

Text: Acts 2:1-47

Rev. Peter Coutts

What are you doing right now that you are unaware of, not mindful of? You are breathing. 12 times a minute, 17,000 times a day, more than half a billion times in a lifetime. Without it we die in minutes. You are because you breathe, yet we are so unaware of it. Our word for breathing in [breathe] is inspire. I invite you, please, to inspire with me [breathe]. Inspiring gives us life. Inspire also means to be divinely influenced by God. For Christians, to be inspired is to be filled with the Holy Spirit, because the Greek words breath and spirit have the same root. To be inspired also means to have a creative idea, to be energized and motivated to act. Today on Pentecost we remember that we are inspired people. On Pentecost the church was born, and the day of birth is the day one starts breathing. The Holy Spirit is the air we breathe as the church. It gives and maintains our life—without it we die. Today we have great gratitude for the gift of the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit inspires us: it is God’s divine influence in the world, God’s influence on the church. Today we celebrate what the church has done because it was inspired: with an imagination that has been inspired by the Spirit, creativity inspired by the Spirit, motivation and action inspired by the Spirit. In our society today we hear that leaders are to inspire their followers. The Spirit is to lead us. We are, as the church, because of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Yet we live as Christians so unaware of it, just like we live unaware of our breathing. But we shouldn’t, for Pentecost was not just one monumental moment in history. What happened Pentecost is our reality daily.

Moments before his ascension, Jesus said to the 11 apostles: “Go, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have taught you.” I imagine several of those 11 disciples were thinking, “You’re kidding, right? All nations? Teach everything? 11 of us? And you are leaving”. Jesus said, I will be with you always. But he also said, at the last supper, “I will send you a helper”. The helper came Pentecost, and it helped a lot. We know the story. The followers of Jesus had gathered for the Jewish celebration of Pentecost. The story says, “And suddenly from Heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind.” They breathed that wind. The Spirit filled them, and they were inspired, in every meaning of the word. Then these Galileans went out into the crowds gathered for that Jewish festival. The story makes the point to say, “Now there were devout Jews from every nation present there.” Hmm. Every nation. That day the Spirit inspired them—that divine influence—providing an ability to speak the different languages of those in the crowd. And the people were astonished, asking themselves, “What does this mean?” The first important question. Peter stood up and said, “I’ll tell you what it means.” At the end of the sermon, people asked the second important question, “So what should we do?” And Peter told them, “Repent, be baptized, become a disciple of Jesus, learn everything he taught.” 3,000 did. Not a bad first day.

I can imagine as they talked in the evening, the sun setting on a miraculous day, the 11 apostles remembering Ascension Day, remembering that great commission Jesus gave them, remembering their own deep skepticism, remembering that Jesus promised to send a helper: the Holy Spirit. I can imagine the apostles putting 2 and 2 and 2 together, adding up Jesus teachings and promises about the Holy Spirit with the great commission to their experience that day.... And saying to themselves, "That impossible task, that commission Jesus gave us.... We do have a helper! We can do this!" The sun came up the next day, and the apostles went out and tried again. And in the days and years to follow they worked at figuring out how to be and live together as followers of Jesus, as the church, influenced by the Spirit to act creatively in new ways their world had never seen before! We read this morning that in the early Christian communities the wealthy took of their riches to help the poor. But there were other inspired innovations. Some women came to have leadership authority in those first faith communities, like Phoebe the deacon, Philip's four daughters who were prophets as well as Euodia and Syntyche who Paul counted as his co-workers. The early faith community was also led to find a way for Jews and Gentiles to be together with no divisions—imagine that! These kinds of things didn't happen in those days! Onlookers would have been astonished, and would continue to ask for years after Pentecost "What does this mean?" And many, discovering what it meant, asked the second question, "so what do we do?" And here we are 2,000 years later, thanks to followers of Jesus who were inspired by the Spirit, in every meaning of the word: breathing it, receiving life from it, being influenced by it, being prompted into creativity, motivation and action.

Like the first Pentecost day in Jerusalem, the people of every nation walk the streets of Calgary today, and we the followers of Jesus are gathered together in one place on Pentecost. Soon we will leave this place, and mingle with them out there... and what will happen? Well, we think: things are different now. Theirs was a society that assumed that God—or gods—existed. Theirs was a society that could accept miracles. Ours? Not so much. 40 years ago less than 1% of Canadians claimed to have no religion. Today over 30% make that claim. A recent study by sociologist Reg Bibby showed that half of Canadian teenagers have never attended a worship service of any kind of any religion ever in their lives. And the other half includes teens that attended one or two only. As we watch society change, and watch our congregations age and decline, we easily think those same thoughts the 11 apostles probably had when they heard the great commission: "Every nation? Teach everything? Just us?"

Pentecost is the day we remind ourselves that we have a helper... that our community of faith lives because we breathe the Holy Spirit—we're inspired! And today we remind ourselves that we can still lean on the Spirit for imagination, creativity, and motivation for action. And that can help us live a life together that observers will find astonishing, and ask of themselves, "What does this mean?" For that is our calling—to prompt that question in others. So that one day perhaps some may also say, "Oh, that's

what it means. So what must I do to be like you?" Our calling, as a faith community, is to be evidence for the existence of God. And we can do that, for a part of the Trinitarian God is the very air we breathe.

In 2006 a man walked into a one-room schoolhouse in West Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. He took 10 girls, ages 6 through 13, hostage, eventually killing half of them before killing himself. The school children were from Amish Mennonite families. How did this Christian community react? As TV crews recorded the chaos of the aftermath of this great tragedy, a grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girls was heard warning some young relatives not to hate the killer, saying, "We must not think evil of this man." Another Amish father noted, "He had a mother and a wife and a soul." This hurting Christian community reached out to the shooter's wife and her three children in compassionate care. They took up a financial collection for their support. With the wife's permission, several family members of victims attended the shooter's funeral, in support of his family. Marie Roberts, the shooter's wife, later expressed her gratitude to this Christian community: "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. ... Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you." This all happened on live TV, this profound act of forgiveness. And viewers were astonished. And many people asked, "How can they be so forgiving?" In the face of death so horrifying, I think the only answer is life brought by the Spirit. Jesus, after all, at the Last Supper, called the Holy Spirit "the comforter." And, among the astonished viewers, perhaps some also thought, "I want to be like that. What do I need to do?" And that too is the Spirit at work. And the Spirit works in the small moments as well. Like when a faith community gathers for worship on Sunday, choosing the enjoyment of God over the enjoyment of summer finally come after a long long Calgary winter. A church doing that in a society that thinks worship of God is odd. The Spirit is in the moment when a child is brought for baptism. In a society that thinks God is a low priority. When a congregation moves in the direction of reaching out to love its neighbours...providing leadership in its neighbourhood to help people love their neighbours more. Doing that in a society that thinks taking care of yourself is the priority. When a congregation does not forget the widow or the orphan or the sick, but visits them and cares for them, in a society that thinks that's the job of the social welfare net. Sound familiar? The Spirit blows through you too. And you are doing imaginative, creative new things inspired by the Spirit.

The theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote that "the possibilities of the church is founded on the power and possibilities of the Holy Spirit." On Pentecost we remind ourselves of that: as we read these ancient stories in scripture, as we recall our own experience as a faith community. Both affirmations can give us the confidence to stretch ourselves creatively still more to imagine new ways to astonish those who watch us. And that might not be so hard. After all, the Holy Spirit is there to inspire us. God wants the world to look at the church and say, "What does that mean? How can that little group do that? Why are they doing that?" In that moment, we are rich evidence for the existence of God. And if some see that, they may also ask, "So what must I do to be like you?"

In about 20 minutes, we will leave this place and join the people from the nations of the world who like us call Calgary home. How will you astonish today? How will this faith community astonish tomorrow? Be of good faith. Jesus reminds us: he has sent a helper.