

Kirby Lawrence Hill                      Abington Presbyterian Church  
June 9, 2019      Pentecost  
John 14:8-17; 25-27  
Acts 2:1-18

## HEAVEN, WIND AND FIRE

There was a birthday party for a child. For entertainment, there was a moon bounce set up in the yard, a clown hired, and a variety of party games being played. A great table of party food was set. A good mix of family and friends were there. One of the older individuals in attendance, the birthday boy's grandfather, seemed less than delighted to be there. He mentioned something about it being too noisy, the kids being too exuberant. "It's funny," he said, "when you're young, you get excited about birthdays, about life and all that is ahead of you. But as you get older, there's less to get excited about. And when your birthday comes, you just get reminded how old you are. People keep saying 'Happy Birthday' to you. There's really nothing all that happy about it." <sup>1</sup>

Well, Happy Birthday, church! Some of the children may be looking for the moon bounce. Others of us are looking for the cake – that will come during the reception following the service. We're not sure of the precise number, but we are within about 15 years of reaching our 2000<sup>th</sup> birthday for ourselves as part of the church that follows Jesus Christ. That makes us pretty old. We may be inclined to sit back and take in the Pentecost story like a noisy party from our past. Yes, we'll eat some cake, then we may plan to go home and take a nap. The enthusiasm was fine years ago, but we are a bit more refined now, aren't we? Is there really anything worth getting excited about as we observe yet another birthday of the church on this Pentecost Sunday?

That raises the question as to why the day of Pentecost described in the Book of Acts is considered the birth of the church. There were other events that were instrumental in the formation of the church – when the disciples were first called, or that time when Jesus, while he was still with them, sent them out in his name to carry out ministry. Of course, the crucifixion and the resurrection are essential for a proper understanding of our purpose. But it is Pentecost Day that we use to refer to our birthday, because that is when the church first truly came to life.

Gospel accounts indicate there had been a number of times when their resurrected Lord Jesus appeared to his earliest followers. But then, they no longer got to see him. Their understanding was that he had ascended to heaven. Earlier, he had told them to wait until God's Spirit was to be poured out upon them before they were to try to carry out all that he had taught them. It was on Pentecost morning that the Spirit came in a powerful way. Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks was a Jewish celebration fifty days after Passover. It marked the spring barley harvest. It also was a time to remember the giving of the ten commandments, the Mosaic law that was the unifying core of their Jewish identity. Unlike Passover, Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks was not to be a quiet family commemoration, but a time when all the people would come together to renew their connection to God and to one another, to live out the intent of the commandments. So, there was quite a broadly diverse crowd of Jewish folks in Jerusalem that day, people whose point of origin was from various places all over the known world. As such, there were people who recognized a wide variety of languages.

The group who were Jesus' closest followers, the very people who had shown a significant lack of courage, unity, and common purpose when the confusing events of Jesus' execution took place, were in a waiting room of sorts that Pentecost morning. Within themselves, they clearly did not have what was needed to hold together as a group, much less become a world-changing organization. They were in dire need. Their leader was gone. They showed no capacity to carry forward his ministry. They were dead in the water. But the same God who brought Jesus back from the dead brought those who loved Jesus back to life as well. Mysteriously, wondrously, sounds of a heavenly wind filled the room. Could it be the same as the wind of creation, the wind of God which once again was bringing something to life? Something that can't be seen, something that moves, something we feel, something whose effects we do see. First, there was wind from heaven. Then there was fire, yet another symbol of God's presence, going back to the story of the burning bush. Somehow, suddenly, here was a whole group of people who were on fire for God, filled with a desire to tell what had happened in Christ's coming, filled with a God-given ability to communicate that message even across the normal bounds of languages. God poured so much of the Spirit into them that the Spirit poured out of them. The disoriented, the tentative, the timid were filled with the same Spirit that

had enlivened Jesus. It was not just an interior event – this outpouring of God’s Spirit moved them from just hanging out together to actively proclaiming and serving among the people. The Spirit of the resurrection suddenly took hold of them and they were utterly transformed, from wavering to focused, from fearful to a passionate boldness. Peter, who so recently couldn’t bring himself to admit to one person in the middle of the night that he even knew Jesus, was now in the light of day publicly proclaiming it before thousands of people. And others, by the same Spirit of God, were transformed.

From my understanding, the birth of the church is not explainable except by the power of God’s Spirit at work. The people who responded to their message that day were rich and poor, people of various ages and backgrounds who had little in common, quite a diverse group. But rather than those differences leading to division, the Spirit provided the essential gifts that enabled the believers to care about and for one another, to experience true community as those who were dedicated to carrying forward the life and ministry of Christ.

It doesn’t make much rational sense that many of you dedicated time to sharing with children and youth beyond your own families about the life and ministry of an itinerant rabbi from long ago and far away, but many of you have with our confirmands as they have grown up within our congregation. There have been various groups of us who have gone to Maine or to southwest Virginia over the last couple of years to serve people we don’t even know who have been through economic disasters of one sort or another. We reach out to meet needs beyond our immediate community in West Kensington and Germantown and around the world in Pakistan. We have found people’s needs to be dire, but what do such needs have to do with us? Yet, some wind as if from heaven keeps blowing us to go outward from this place. It was a bit crazy for those of you who don’t have mobility problems to give what is a lot of money, to give sacrificially in order to pave the way toward building an elevator for those here and those not yet here who might need it. And why do we come to all of these meetings around here to try to figure out new ways to care for the poor, to communicate with and reach out to the bereaved, the storm-struck, the lonely, the directionless?

Could it be that the heavenly wind of God is blowing still? Was it only a brief spark that appeared a long time ago? Or are there, by the Spirit of God, new connections with God and others that move us out of our comfort zones to spread good news? Something tells me that on this Pentecost Sunday, we aren't just observing the anniversary of the birth of a movement long ago and far away. Something tells me the Spirit of God is still needed around here and that there is a heavenly wind that blows, a fire that burns in our midst. And what may happen next? We don't know, but Someone who inspires dreams and visions, Someone who knows how to make something out of nothing, Someone who knows a thing or two about birth and life and resurrection and new beginnings, that Someone knows and will bring about something wondrous. The anniversary of our birthday – that would be worth celebrating. But this day may well be, by the power of the very Spirit of God, the renewed birth of God's love, God's presence, God's gifts coming in a whole new way. The wind still blows, the fire still burns – that's worth celebrating. Thanks be to God. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>From a story told in "Controlling the Wind," a sermon by Rev. Charles Reeb, Pasadena Community Church (United Methodist), St. Petersburg, FL, [www.dayone.org](http://www.dayone.org)