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Pilgrim United Church of Christ
Day of Pentecost
June 4, 2017

Scripture: [Numbers 11:16-30](#) and [Acts 2:1-18](#)

On Thursday afternoon, I had the honor of performing a baby dedication for an interfaith couple at their house only a couple of miles from here. The backyard was filled with family and friends and dogs -- and birds and squirrels and string lights. People came from all over: Georgia, Texas, California, Mexico, Spain... Raleigh... leaning in to listen and respond to promises about this child that was so special to all of them, as far-flung across the globe as they all were.

During the blessing, the rock star of a baby 1. insisted on being nursed during the ceremony, and 2. kicked water alllll over me, and nearly everyone else. As we were taking post-ceremony pictures, water was still dripping down my face and covering my glasses -- and I didn't wipe it off.

I heard Jesus saying, "You will be baptized by the Holy Spirit." *And a little child shall lead it.*

Today, Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate baptism by the Spirit. And we're talking full immersion: it starts with a little head sprinkling and then completely takes over everyone and everything. Falling fifty days after Passover, in the Jewish tradition, Pentecost is also called the Feast of Weeks and celebrates God's law being given to the Israelites. In the Christian tradition, we remember the story we heard from Acts this morning, the coming of the Holy Spirit and, as a result, the first Bilingual Exchange!

Jesus had promised an Advocate would come to his friends and followers in the wake of his ascension. He had told them -- warned them? -- they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit comes, all right -- seemingly leaving the place where everyone is gathered looking like the back of my car. The Spirit bursts onto the scene, blowing into the gathering in gale-force winds and flowing out of them in a cacophony of language that draws crowds leaning in to listen.

In other words, those gathered *breathe in the breath of God*, and *speak out the love of God*.

Or they breathe in the breath of God and, *in other words*, speak out the love of God.

The story of Pentecost is a kind of recreation: like languages that evolve into separate branches but share similar roots, the scene in Acts echoes sounds from the Numbers narrative we also heard this morning. Did you notice?

Both begin with a central gathering: In Numbers, Moses calls 70 elders into a tent -- the tent of meeting that would have been in the center of the Israelites' camp in the wilderness. The tent of meeting housed the Tabernacle, considered to be the place where God's presence dwelled.

In Acts, Jesus' friends and disciples -- the early collection of what has become the Christian church -- are gathered together in an unnamed house in Jerusalem, another central and holy place.

In both accounts, there is a sudden divine arrival that moves in like a shifting weather front. Actually the divine arrival comes *as* a weather front: In Numbers, "the LORD [comes] down in a cloud" and the Spirit rests on the 70. In Acts, the Spirit enters in the form of wind and turns it into a real housewarming party, resting on each person as a tongue of fire -- whatever that means. And please don't ask me what it means because I don't know. If I think about it too long I start to see scenes from *Fantasia*.

Tellingly, in both narratives the experience of God is a communal encounter: In Acts, after the crowd is bewildered by the symphony of sounds, Peter recalls and repeats the words of the prophet Joel: "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. . . Even upon slaves, women and men, I will pour out my Spirit..."

In Numbers, this happens to the 70 -- including, importantly, two who don't come into the tent of meeting, who, for whatever reason do not come nearer to the "holy" place. The Spirit blows past presumed boundaries onto two literal outsiders.

And it makes Joshua, Moses' assistant and eventual successor, really uncomfortable: "*My lord* Moses, stop it!" (Okay, his inflection was probably a little different.) "*My lord* Moses, stop it!"

To which Moses, leader of the people of Israel, Holy House press secretary, says, "Are you jealous for me? I *wish* God's spirit were on all people, making all prophets!" Moses,

the most important prophet in Judaism, refuses the monopoly of blessing. Moses is willing to speak in tandem, and to listen.

The story in Acts was not the first time the Spirit came upon and took over God's people. We know that because we see a similar scene in Numbers.

The story in Acts is not the last time the Spirit comes and takes over God's people. We know because we're part of this church where it happens often.

We see and hear it literally in other languages during our ministry of Bilingual Exchange, as immigrant families learn English and are tutored to help them succeed in school and day-to-day life.

We see and hear it at Urban Ministries, when just last week a group of Pilgrims made and served a great meal to 250 of our neighbors.

We see and hear it in our Memorial Garden, imagined and created by one of our youth to be a place for people to return ashes to earth, and to remember loved ones, and to honor and savor creation.

We see and hear it in our Labyrinth Committee who has done the most incredible job re-creating the Columbarium into a beautiful space of walking, reflecting, and re-connecting with God.

We see and hear it our Ambassadors who graciously and joyfully greet us as we arrive -- especially new visitors -- who remind us that each of us is welcome and wanted in this place.

You all know I could go on and on... but the spirit of longtime member Bill Dickerson, shouting "Won't that woman ever be quiet?" is upon me.

Last Sunday at the Eno, we retold and reheard the part of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians about the church being a many-membered body, interconnected and interdependent, who *together* suffer and *together* rejoice. Each part is equally needed. Of course, we heard the New Revised Pilgrim Version of the passage, with many Pilgrim voices jumping in to name the parts they embody: *ushers, artists, musicians, deacons, trustees... Southern and Northerners, recovering Catholics and Baptists...*

Later in the week, someone told me that the reading had always been a kind of ho-hum, here-we-go-again reading for her, but the way it was read, with a chorus of Pilgrim voices -- and of course Beverly and Bill's sassiness -- made it fresh and wonderful. The thing is the way it was read by our community reflected the way it is lived by our community.

Our scripture passages today are perfect reminders for this season in our church's life. Reminders bring closer to the surface things we already know deep down.

As we get closer to calling our next pastor, we remember that our community of faith is much more than our next Moses or Peter.

We remember that the coming of the Spirit is a communal encounter.

We remember to refuse the monopoly of blessing.

And when the ones we are drawn to serve with bless us we will not wipe it off.

When we breathe in the breath of God and *in other words*, in different languages depending on who we are and from where we have come, we will speak in tandem the love of God.

May it always be so...

Invitation to Table:

This day of Pentecost, especially, we remember that we are pilgrims coming from many places and backgrounds, following different paths and speaking different languages... arriving together to taste and see the meal and mystery offered across the ages. A meal where all are welcome and wanted without question. An open table spread wide by a God whose love overcomes all the rules and expectations the anxious world can make.

As we come, may we find there is a space for us here, there is space for all...