

Willow River Parish—Clear Lake, Deer Park, Forest United Methodist

John 7:37-39

On the last and most important day of the festival, Jesus stood up and shouted, “All who are thirsty should come to me! All who believe in me should drink! As the scriptures said concerning me, ‘Rivers of living water will flow out from within him.’”

Jesus said this concerning the Spirit. Those who believed in Him would soon receive the Spirit, but they hadn’t experienced the Spirit yet since Jesus hadn’t yet been glorified.

1. The Wind Came

A woman named Alice tells about her nephew’s 10-year-old son who came for a visit one hot, July weekend. “Look, Alice,” he said as he ran over to where she was sitting. “I found a kite. Could we go outside and fly it?”

Glancing out a nearby window, Alice noticed there was not a breeze stirring. She said, “I’m sorry, Tripper. The wind is not blowing today. The kite won’t fly.”

The determined 10-year-old replied, “I think it’s windy enough. I can get it to fly.” He hurried out the back door.

She peeked through the slats in the Venetian blinds to watch determination in action. Up and down the yard he ran, pulling the kite attached to a small length of string. The plastic kite, proudly displaying a picture of Batman, remained about shoulder level. He ran back and forth, as hard as his ten-year-old legs would carry him, looking back hopefully at the kite trailing behind.

After about ten minutes of unsuccessful determination, he came back in. Alice asked, “How did it go?”

“Fine,” he said, not wanting to admit defeat. “I got it to fly some.”

As he walked past her to return the kite to the closet shelf, she heard him say under his breath, “I guess I’ll have to wait for the wind.”

At that moment, she says, she heard another Voice speak to her heart. The voice said, “Alice, sometimes you are just like that. You want to do it your way instead of waiting for the “wind” —the “wind of God.”

2. **First Pentecost**

In Acts 1, before His ascension into heaven, Jesus instructed His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came upon Him. The Biblical word for Spirit is the same word for wind. The disciples were waiting for the wind—the wind of God. In Acts 2 we read, “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”

They waited on the wind...they waited on the Spirit...and a mighty wind it was...it blew so hard that the world has never again been the same.

3. **Wind**

Earlier this week, Sue D’Alessio, a member of the Wisconsin Annual Conference Cabinet, commented on this wind.

Wind is a powerful metaphor for many of our experiences of God. (Of course, every metaphor limits as well as expands our understanding, which is why we use so many metaphors for God: shepherd, creator, shield, fortress, father, savior, rock...Each metaphor we use expresses a different aspect of our experience of God.)

Wind is always in motion and it always moves whatever it touches. Wind can be a gentle breeze which teases and caresses, or a strong gust which blows and pushed, or a whirling tornado which threatens and destroys. There are times when wind is quiet or silent, times when we experience wind as a surprise or relief or delight, and times when wind knocks us off our feet or destabilizes us so completely that we cannot stand. What are your experiences with wind?

If you replace the word “wind” in the previous paragraph with the word “Spirit,” might this describe some of how you have experienced God’s presence in your life? When have you experienced the gentle moving Spirit of God? Have there been times it seemed like God has been quiet or silent in your life? When have you been destabilized and knocked over by God?

The story in Acts describes the Spirit as “a sound like the rush of a violent wind” which destabilized and changed their lives. They had been sequestered away in fear and uncertainty about what to do next after Jesus had died, and even after the resurrection experiences of Jesus. The Spirit moved them to speak up and speak out—in many languages—to tell the stories of their experiences and understanding of Jesus. How have you experienced God’s presence in the midst of this pandemic, physical distancing and destabilization, even as we search for healthy and safe ways to remain connected as the church? How might God be moving you/us into new ways of being people of faith in our world today?

4. The church

Jesus promised a kingdom; what we got was the church.

Pentecost marks the birth of the church. After Christmas and Easter, Pentecost is the most important celebration of the Christian calendar. The term comes from the Greek word “pentekostos,” meaning fiftieth. Fifty days after Passover, Jews celebrated the “Feast of Harvest” or “Feast of weeks”. Centuries later, after their exile to Babylon, Pentecost became one of the great pilgrimage feasts of Judaism, when Diaspora Jews returned to Jerusalem to worship.

Pentecost not only birthed the church; it begot a bureaucracy. Across the centuries, human institutions became the wineskins for Spirit-led inspirations, and therein lies both the wit and the wisdom in the irony between the difference between God’s vibrant kingdom and moribund human churches.

It’s easy to criticize the church as a deeply flawed organization, but the institutionalization of the Jesus movement was both inevitable and necessary. Nothing happens without Spirit-led people, but nothing lasts without institutions. How should they organize five thousand new converts? What was its main message? What constituted proper worship and why? Could Gentiles join what was initially Jewish movement, and if they did should they observe the Mosaic traditions? Who would lead and why? How broad or narrow were its boundaries? What were reasonable procedures and protocols for feeding widows, collecting money for famine relief, sending out missionaries like Paul and Barnabas, or adjudicating disputes? In short, where was the Spirit of God blowing, where was the Spirit’s fire burning, and how could you be sure? These and many other questions required that the movement of the Spirit become a bureaucratic organization.

From those first tongues of fire described by Luke until today, from small beginnings as a vibrant movement to ecclesiastical institutions that two billion Christians call home, that has been the perennial challenge—how do we facilitate the Spirit’s fire without shattering the bottle or extinguishing the flame?

5. **Pentecost**

Pentecost was an agricultural feast—the end of the barley harvest and the wheat harvests beginning. It expressed thanksgiving for another year of provision and prayer for the harvest to come. But it also commemorated the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai, fifty days after the Passover. For the gathered disciples, Jesus’ words about the fields being ripe for harvest must have had a familiar ring. This new (or fulfilled) law that he had taught and demonstrated was now being written on their hearts.

The reign of God that was manifest on that day was welcoming in the extreme. In the Babel story, arrogant human beings had been separated from one another by the confusion of their language, but here the curse is reversed and all barriers are overcome. The Kingdom is for all. Once they had caught the vision, the disciples spread the message to the whole world, including women, eunuchs, slaves, Gentiles, soldiers, revolutionaries, and even those, like Saul, who were deeply opposed to the way of Christ.

There is no question that God’s Spirit is unrestrainedly active in human affairs. What we need is not so much an outpouring of the Spirit as an awakening to the Spirit’s power and presence, and to the radically welcoming reign of God. As we worship the Pentecost Sunday, we must ask: Are we willing to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by a vision of God’s radically inclusive Kingdom, and to begin to live it out through Spirit-empowered acts of welcome, compassion, grace, and service? Are we ready

to have Christ's law of love written on our hearts, to have our way illumined by the Spirit's fire and to be blown into unexpected relationships by the wind of the Spirit? If we can answer yes, even just a little, the Pentecost experience will come to us, and we will never be the same.

6. **Always With Us**

John says, "Those who believed in Him would soon receive the Spirit, but they hadn't experienced the Spirit yet since Jesus hadn't yet been glorified."

They hadn't had a personal experience---they had not received the Spirit. However, I believe they had unknowingly experienced the Spirit.

Jesus performed all of His miracles through the power of the Holy Spirit. He did His teaching through the Holy Spirit. Jesus was resurrected through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has always been in the world.

God is always with you through the power of the Holy Spirit. We have seen things happen that are hard to explain—the Holy Spirit at work. We may not feel the Holy Spirit, but we have experienced the Holy Spirit. May we feel the Holy Spirit in our lives today.