

Sermon for May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020

Pentecost Sunday (Year A)

Sermon Texts: Act 2: 1-21 and John 7:37-39

Sermon Title: *God's Housekeeping*

**PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Holy Spirit, come. With rushing wind and holy fire, with tongues of flame and hopes rekindled, with visions birthed and dreams restored, rushing wind, and holy fire, come Holy Spirit, come. Blow open the doors of our closed hearts, and set our tongues free to proclaim your justice, mercy, and grace. Bestow your gifts upon the young that they might have visions, and the old that they might dream dreams. Blow into our lives and renew us a people of faith that we might find truth, strength and courage to be the people that you have called us to be. Amen.**

**PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: Lord, send your Spirit to us that we might have the eyes to see and the ears to hear what you have to say to us today. Amen.**

My sister had a saying about cleaning your house: *You have to mess up before you can clean up.* What she meant by that was in order to deep clean – to wash walls, clean the baseboards, chase those dust bunnies from under furniture – you have to move things into the center of the room, and disturb the order of things. What you end up with, at least for a time, is a mess. The birth of the church, as told by Luke in Acts, starts with a bit of a mess as well. God's housekeeping.

As Luke tells it, there were thousands of people in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, a Jewish holiday falling fifty days after Passover, essentially fifty days after Easter. The subtext for this Jewish holiday was the celebration of God's gift of the Ten Commandments to the Israelites through Moses on Mount Sinai. Suddenly there was a sound like the rush of a violent wind. The holy hurricane had arrived. The people gathered there were at first bewildered, astonished, and amazed. Some wanted to know what these events meant; others sneered and said *They are filled with new wine.* Then Simon Peter explains what has happened- God has given them what Jesus had promised: the HOLY SPIRIT. After Peter's preaching, three thousand people are baptized and confess their faith in Jesus Christ. It is a spectacular event. It is messy – this birth of the church.

We need to be reminded that it is the Holy Spirit that keeps any church alive. A lot of people come to church because it is a stable, comfortable, hopefully hospitable place. As Presbyterians, we have our Book of Order; doesn't the name say it all? We like to do things decently and in order.

What happens when the Spirit leaves the church? Sometimes we don't even notice, particularly if we have energetic members, an endowment, and little to no debt. A dead church with assets can go on for some time, functioning as a social club, until most of its members reside in the cemetery.

But if the Spirit is in the church, we should have a bit of a mess, because it is this Spirit that is the agent of change in the world. The most radical thing anyone can do, the most political statement anyone can make, is to say that she or he is a Christian. So, why aren't all those folks who want

to change the world, young and old, showing up at our churches? What if 3000 people showed up at South Plains, even in a Zoom service, eager to learn about God, demanding new programs, and questioning why we are mostly eager to keep things exactly the way they are, not challenging the status quo, and hunkering down in a manner that makes us feel safe? What if we had to knock down walls, open doors, be changed, because the Holy Spirit had led all these people to our door?

Pentecost is a wonderful reminder that to be open to the gift of the Holy Spirit means that we have to be open to where the Spirit takes us. Asking the Holy Spirit to come is one thing. The second thing is to recognize the Spirit when it shows up. The minister William Willimon tells the story of a church that he once served that took seriously a door-to-door visitation program in the church's neighborhood. It worked. People showed up, but according to Willimon *they were the wrong people.*

*We had evangelized a group of people who had all sorts of family and personal problems, people who were down on their luck, at the end of their rope, in short, people who were not at all like us. We were forced to admit that we wanted to grow, but not just in any direction! We wanted to grow in our direction rather than God's.*

One of the things that this pandemic has pointed out is that life can change very suddenly, not just for one of us, but for all of us. The second thing that we might have noticed is that many of the wells of society from which we have all drawn, are empty and leaving us parched. In John's gospel, Jesus says, *Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.*

The world's promises tend to be hollow. Advertisers who have sold us everything from soup to nuts, from soap to cars, from fragrances to motorcycles know that we are thirsty for excitement, possessions, fame, security, and meaning. But how are those promises working out for us now? What do any of them matter to someone struggling for the next breath?

John tells us that *out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.* In today's reading the Spirit is yet to be received because Jesus has not yet been glorified. In John, the Spirit is poured out only when Jesus gives up his own Spirit in death. After his death, Jesus suddenly appears behind closed doors somewhere in Jerusalem where the frightened disciples are hiding from the authorities and says "*Peace be with you.*" He breathes on them and says *Receive the Holy Spirit.* No hurricane or thunderstorm, but a human breath.

When Peter is trying to explain what has happened in church the day of Pentecost, he turns to Hebrew Scriptures and reaches for an obscure text from the prophet Joel: *There will be portents in the Heavens above/ And signs on earth beneath/ Blood, fire, and smoky mist/ The sun will be turned to darkness/ and the moon to blood/ Before the coming of the Lord.* Joel gives us apocalyptic poetry. Peter is reaching for language, poetry (the best words in their best order) to symbolize the new age that comes upon us when our fixed world, our fixed understanding, is disrupted by the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit comes like a holy hurricane, knocking down doors and rattling and rolling away the fixed understandings of the church, and the Holy Spirit also comes as God's own breath. A moment by moment gift to each one of us.

The Holy Spirit will not leave us individually or the church in our comfort zones. Do we dare to pray that the Holy Spirit works through us and through this church beyond anything we may have dreamed or imagined? Do we dare to have our heads set on fire, dream dreams and see visions of what God would have us become? It's a choice we all make, consciously or unconsciously.

Take a deep breath. Believe that you are taking in God's own breath. Now let your breath go, believing that you are giving something back to the world with a little bit of yourself attached. Let's see what happens next. Amen.