

TEXT: Acts 2:1-21
THEME: The Spirit is given to each one for the common good
SUBJECT: The Spirit of God
TITLE: Bewildered

Pentecost Sunday
31 May 2020
Messiah Moravian
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As time goes by, as our experience of life changes, as life changes, what we took for granted becomes what we most cherish.

Luke sets the scene for his story of Pentecost with a phrase that now strikes us as more miraculous than “tongues of fire:” the apostles were all together in one place. Together. In one place. Our inability to gather together in one place, to see each other in-person, to greet each other, to extend the right hand of fellowship if not a hug, now seems more valuable than miraculous speech. We liked being together; now we long to be together.

The most heart wrenching manifestation of physical distancing is separation of the sick and dying from their families, people they were together with their whole lives. “FaceTime” or “Zoom” from a hospital bed does not equal presence, being with.

On the humorous side, South Jersey grandmother Maureen Sweeny, dressed up in a unicorn costume to hug her grandsons, something she hadn’t done for 70 days. The four and seven year old boys ran into her arms. They were together again, sort of. The boys were still unable to see grandma’s face, covered, as was the rest of grandma, in pink plastic.

This loss of what we took for granted casts the irritants of life together in a new light. The personal differences, the idiosyncrasies, don’t feel as important as they seemed three months ago. Being deprived of community, even when fraught with the tensions of competing interests and differing perspectives, makes us realize how much we value and desire what is now denied us.

I don’t know when we will be together again, together as we were three months ago. The when and the how of life together is a work in progress guided in our case by the PEC.

The denominational headquarters of the church my brother and his wife attend has already advised against in-person worship until May of 2021. New circumstances could mitigate this seemingly drastic move, but for now they will continue live-streaming worship.

My brother and his wife like what live-streaming affords: “going to church” in their pajamas while sitting on the couch with Hazel, the golden retriever, drinking coffee during the sermon. However, it is as far from being together as hugging your grandsons through a plastic unicorn costume. Better than nothing, but not the same.

What has us bewildered is not the violent wind of Pentecost, but a novel coronavirus. I am not suggesting the virus is like the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit creates and inspires, strengthens and

comforts. In short, the Holy Spirit empowers us for living fully, freely, faithfully. The novel coronavirus weakens, sickens and kills. However, both the Holy Spirit and the virus disrupt life as we know it, leaving us bewildered.

Luke says the house where the apostles were gathered together was *filled* with a violent wind and each one present was *filled* with the Holy Spirit. Skeptics thought the apostles were *filled* with new wine. One sign the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit rather than new wine is that they were filled with something other than themselves.

To me this is the true miracle of Pentecost: to be filled with something other than self. The power to take us out of ourselves is such an odd phenomenon that it draws a large crowd. The experience is so disorienting the crowd is bewildered. To be bewildered is to lose accustomed reference points, to be unable to reconcile your experience with what you know or thought you knew.

How many times in the last two months have you heard, “We’ve never experienced anything like this”? We are disoriented, as disoriented as the crowd gathered by a violent wind. And like some in that crowd, we are tempted to dismiss what disorients us rather than deal with a new reality. We may not accuse the scientists of being filled with new wine, but record sales of alcohol suggest we may be.

Being bewildered is not pleasant. Who doesn’t want to return to normal, to life as we knew it before the novel coronavirus? Who wants to embrace the new normal, whatever that is? To think and act as if our experience is other than it really is, is the easy way out of bewilderment. It is also deadly.

Pilgrimage through the dark night of the unknown is not a journey any of us would choose. Coping with the fear of the unknown, groping in the dark for new reference points that guide us into new ways of being together is hard work. This journey will require more patience than passion if we are not to be filled with anger.

The story of Pentecost is the story of the One and the many: there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone (1 Corinthians 12:4). Each of us is gifted, not so we can be filled with pride but with power to serve the common good. Serving out of our gifts is how we become who we truly are and how we will find our way through the loss and grief we know.

In the 1930’s a young traveler was exploring the French Alps. He came upon a vast stretch of barren land. It was desolate. It was forbidding. It was ugly. It was the kind of place you hurry away from.

Then, suddenly, the young traveler stopped and stared. In the middle of the vast wasteland was a bent-over old man. On his back was a sack of acorns. In his hand was a four-foot-long iron pipe.

The man was using the iron pipe to punch holes in the ground. Then from the sack he would take an acorn and put it in the hole.

Later the old man told the traveler, "I've planted over 100,000 acorns. Perhaps only a tenth of them will grow." The old man's wife and son had died, and this was how he was spending his final years. "I want to do something useful," he said.

Twenty-five years later the traveler returned to the same desolate spot. What he saw amazed him. The land was covered with a beautiful forest two miles wide and five miles long. Birds were singing. Animals were playing. Wildflowers perfumed the air.

We grieve. We wonder what will be, who we will become. We want to do something useful. We find our way through the unknown by serving the common good according to our gifts. By doing something useful we plant seeds of new life. What will renew life is already implicit in our nature's inmost essence, in the very God who activates in each of us what is needed now.

PRAYER: by Richard Rolle (1300-1349), a mystic who spent many years wandering as a pilgrim.

O Holy Spirit, Who breathes
where You will, breathe into me
and draw me to Yourself.

Invest the nature You have shaped,
with gifts so flowing with honey that,
from intense joy in Your sweetness,

this clay might turn from lesser things,
that it may accept (as You give them)
spiritual gifts, and through pleasing

jubilant, it may melt, entirely,
in holy love, reaching finally out
to touch the Uncreated Light.