

May 15, 2005
Acts 2:1-13; John 20:19-23
First Parish Church
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All Together in One Place

Do you remember the Biosphere2 project, located near Tucson, AZ, that was so prominent in the news in the early 1990s? The huge glass and metal structure of Biosphere 2 was meant to create an environment to mimic Biosphere1 – the earth. This privately funded ecological research project was sometimes referred to as part Noah’s Ark and part Garden of Eden greenhouse. The mission was to explore new ideas for recycling, to better understand the working of the earth’s biosphere and to provide clues for building habitat on other planets. What I remember most about this project was an interview with one of the people who had lived in the biosphere for a couple of years. When this person was asked, “What did you miss most?” the person replied, “the wind.” Not lobster dinners, not movies, not fancy clothes and a fast car, but the wind.

I suspect we generally pay less attention to the wind than our ancestors. We travel in closed vehicles, we have more insulated homes, and we rely on the media for weather reports. Yet, it can be unsettling when the air around us gets too still for too long, as those in the Biosphere discovered. Or as we might say, “I’m going out for fresh air.”

One of the prominent biblical images of the Holy Spirit is the image of wind or breath. We find it in the very opening lines of Genesis.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...the spirit (the wind) of God moved over the face of the waters... The Hebrew word is ruah. It can be translated wind, spirit, or breath. All these meanings are intertwined in the same word. In Hebrew it is a rich word, with many nuances. When we translate it into English, however, we have to choose one of the meanings so it loses some of its depth and breadth.

As the creation stories continue, God breathes this wind/spirit/breath into the earth creature so that the creature becomes a living soul. What an incredibly powerful image, this ruah! The movement of God, the spirit of God, that first called forth life from the void, is the very same spirit, the very breath of God that imparts life to the earth creature. The breath of the earth is the same breath that moves within and among us as the spirit of God.

Spirit talk has not been a prominent part of our congregational tradition. Some people might argue that we are really bitarian instead of Trinitarian since we tend to speak a lot about God and Jesus, but not often of the Spirit. Is it because

the Spirit is the manifestation of the divine presence that is so unpredictable, uncontrollable, and downright mysterious? We can't program for it, schedule it, or even put our experience of it into words, at least not easily. And people's expression of those experiences covers such a wide range of demeanor. Some folk are more drawn to ecstatic expressions of the spirit and some are more inclined toward quiet and gentle flutterings.

Maybe you've heard the story of a meeting of these two styles, when a man visits a congregation, which is inclined toward quiet worship. He, on the other hand, had a more vocal approach. During the sermon, he became rather enthused and began crying out, "Amen." After a few of these outbursts one of the ushers hurried down the aisle and whispered to him, "We don't do that in this church. "But I've got the Spirit," the man replied. To which the usher responded, "Well you didn't get it here." I suspect both of them went home shaking their heads.

I think the usher would probably be more comfortable with today's gospel reading from John and the visiting fellow would probably resonate with the story in Acts.

Remember in John's gospel,

Jesus came to the frightened disciples when they were hidden behind locked doors and said to them, "Peace be with you." Then, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

It is a relatively quiet experience in which Jesus breathes on the disciples, conveying the gift of the Holy Spirit. This scene may have a quiet demeanor on the surface. Yet, in other ways, this is

holy CPR. Jesus is resuscitating his followers, who at that moment must have felt like their hopes and their dreams had died along with him. It was as if their lives had turned back to dust. Jesus' breathing of the Holy Spirit on them is a second birth, a new creation. It may have started as a gentle experience of a breath, but it was a breath that turned the disciples into a mighty wind that stirred up the world.

In the story in Acts, we see quite a different dynamic going on. It starts with a mighty wind. The disciples are not huddled with fear behind locked doors, they have gathered for the Feast of Booths on the day of Pentecost. The story says that a mighty wind rushes among the disciples filling them with the Holy Spirit. It would probably take a mighty wind to catch their attention in the midst of a festival.

The experiences have different flavors, yet both experiences have the same end result – to send the disciples forth on their mission to tell others about God's grace.

Both of these scenes are spiritual experiences. Although we may not talk much about The Spirit, there is a lot of talk these days about spiritual and spirituality. We are at an interesting point in church life. We are experiencing a tension between what people term religion and what they call spirituality. We often hear people say, "I'm not religious, but I am spiritual." Maybe you've said it yourself. What is the tension we're experiencing that is expressed as religion versus spirituality? Is it the tradition versus the contemporary?

Is it institutional practices versus spontaneity?

Is it a perception of a closed circle versus a more open approach?

Is it communal versus individual?

I think all of these are factors and important for us to consider. But for today, I want to comment of this last tension –between communal and individual- for I think it is touched on in today's stories. In each case the presence of the Holy Spirit is manifested when they are all together in one place.

Does the spirit come to us in private devotions? Yes.

Does the spirit come to us as we weep alone beside a grave? Yes.

Does the spirit come to us on long solitary walks on the beach? Yes.

But there are other times when the power of the spirit is manifested only when we are all together in one place. That's why we come to worship.

In family life, we instinctively know the need to be all together in one place. In parent conversations on Thursday evening, we have been talking about this. We've talked about the multiplicity of options available to parents and children for education, enrichment, and exploration – sports, music, dance, theater.... Each is great and enhances the individual participating in it. But there comes a time when we have to say no to some of this so that we will have time to be together.

For some families that is a commitment to having evening meals together. For other families because of their commitment to provide their own childcare, and thus parents need to work

different shifts, they have to find other ways/times to be all together.

The same is true for us as the family of God – as a congregation of God's people. We have a multiplicity of options and responsibilities that fill and overflow our calendars. Yet, it is crucial for us to have time to be together:

- Together to celebrate, as we will this afternoon – celebrating not only our life together but also our connection to the wider United Church of Christ.
- Together when we are experiencing loss or struggle. At the moment, for our community, that includes dealing with Friday's news about the proposed changes at the base here in Brunswick.
- Together so that the Spirit may move among us.

As the wind blows where it will, so does the Spirit. We cannot predict in what ways the Spirit will move us, but we know and trust that it will. The Spirit does and will continue to move within and among us, calling us to ministries of sharing God's grace with all those we meet.

