

Pentecost People
First+Metropolitan United Church
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May 27, 2007

Once we were no people; now we are God's people.

This day, our prayers are especially with our Moderator, David Giuliano, as tomorrow he undergoes surgery to remove a cancerous tumour on his forehead just above his eye. I saw David a week ago at the United Church's Faith in the City event in Montreal. He is in good spirits. He reflected that one way of looking at cancer is that cancer cells are cells that have forgotten what they are supposed to be.

Today's scripture from Acts (Acts 2: 1 – 21) wants us never to forget who we are supposed to be. Indeed, a primary meaning behind this great festive day is about a people finding their purpose, a people being given their identity... It is our story. We are a Pentecost people – a people of the Spirit – a spirited people, even. Spirit, breath, wind – for the Ancient Hebrews, they all are conveyed by one word - Ruach.

Pentecost people know the importance of breathing deeply. Your body knows this too. If you think back to a time of great stress in your life, most likely it was also a time when you sighed a lot. This is because when we feel deep stress, we tend to breathe very shallow breaths. And, so our body compensates for the lack of oxygen by making us sigh. Our body forces us to take a deep breath.

Maybe some of us here have been forgetting to breathe, forgetting to breathe deeply. We go from task to task, from stress to stress, from problem to problem. And before we know it, we are simply breathless. Shannon Johnson Kershner proposes that this is how it must have been for the disciples by the time they arrived at today's reading in Acts. Remember all that has happened in the previous 50 days: the last supper, Jesus' arrest and crucifixion and then the Easter experience and the delirious high of being in the near presence of the Risen One.

But now, just as the disciples have caught their breath, Jesus did as he said he would – he left. As he bids them farewell, there must have been a great collective sigh: the stress stifling, the chaos collecting around their throats. And so the disciples did what all good church people do in times of fear and chaos; they had a meeting. They needed to get organized. For there was so much work Jesus had left in their trembling hands. They needed to choose more apostles – more ordered ministry folk – to help them. They could not believe they were now the ones in charge of continuing Jesus' ministry and sharing his gospel. It was enough to leave them breathless.

But before the disciples knew what was happening, they heard a mighty wind heading their way. The wind blew through the entire house, filling each of them with a breath that came from somewhere else, Someone Else...yet, a breath that connected with something deep within them.

This wind, this breath, filled them with a courage they had not known before. They had not asked for this breath nor expected it. It just swooped into the room and filled them in a way they could have never predicted nor orchestrated. They came face to face, lung to lung, with the gift of God's Holy Spirit, God's sacred breath.

What happened next? Those Pentecost people burst out in a whole waterfall of languages – the words just kept flowing and splashing and cascading. Each in their own language told the story of how they once were no people; but now they were Christ's people. Once they had no name – no identity; but now, they were sons and daughters of the living God.

What a racket they made – so much for good orderly worship! Some in the crowd even thought they must be drunk. No wonder the Ancient Celts pictured the Spirit as a wild goose – not a docile dove, but a wild goose. And a wild goose is one noisy, bothersome bird. Don't go around trying to domesticate it!

Here were all these people – people from near and far, locals and foreigners, young and old – people of countless races and languages all rejoicing together and understanding one another. Surely, the miracle of Pentecost is that the babble and confusion that results from the Tower of Babel is reversed, and everyone understands the Good News of Christ in their own language.

Yet, in today's world, the babble and confusion persist. Babble and confusion – you can see it, you can hear it, in the strutting of the nations. Babble and confusion – you can see it, you can hear it, in that great failed experiment of the past century called television. "Reality TV" – give me a break! It's an oxymoron. Babble and confusion – sad to say, you can see it, you can hear it, in many of our churches today.

Listen to how Jesus cuts through the babble, as he preaches his first sermon:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
for She has anointed me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of God's favour"

Once we were no people; but now, Pentecost announces that as God's people, you and I are called to cut through the babble, and to build bridges of understanding.

With the arrival of the Pentecost Spirit, the differences between peoples of the world, be they in accent, language, race or ethnicity, suddenly are not something to fear but something to celebrate for they give witness to the diversity that is in God. Our identity as Pentecost people is not about making everyone like everybody else, or to have everybody speak the same language. Instead the people exclaim, "In our own language we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."

It is estimated (according to the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education website), that in 1492, when the people of North America discovered Columbus, there were over 300 different languages being spoken. Today, less than half of these languages are now gone and many others are at risk of being lost.

The people exclaimed, "In our own language we hear them speaking about God's mighty deeds." Isn't this the most amazing aspect of the whole thing? Not the tongues of fire, not even the sudden rush of a mighty wind, but the claim that people who are different from one another can hear and be heard by one another.

How did it happen? And why isn't more of this happening in our churches and communities? I suppose it required that people be ready to speak – to speak the truth as they understand it in love. That not an easy thing to do, is it?

I didn't speak until I was three. My family had become very concerned about it. Then when I spoke, my first word was a four letter swear word. My poor mother didn't know whether to jump up and down for joy or to wash my mouth out with soap. Not the most promising beginnings for a preacher! It took me three years before I spoke my first word, but I know it is going to take me a lifetime and more to learn the art of speaking the truth in love.

However, in God's economy we were given only one mouth but two ears – maybe we should take the hint. While in Montreal a week ago, I heard a man from Angola named Anton. He spoke about a radio program supported by the United Church called "Radio Refugee." It's a program for refugees by refugees with an audience of 15,000. Anton told how this program allows refugees to have a voice in their adopted

country. "I would do anything to keep it going," he said. Then he took a deep breath and broke into song. He later explained that, while held in detention back in Angola, singing was what had sustained him.

Most of what Anton said I could not understand, for he spoke in a language different from my own. But there was a woman, Yvette, who translated, and rarely has a person shown such total undivided attention to another as did this woman in listening to Anton. Listening, really listening... What is it you have been hearing about the needs and dreams of people in this city?

Right below this sanctuary is housed the Inter Cultural Association of Greater Victoria. Every weekday, numerous immigrants come into our building to take classes and consult their offices. Every year, they serve over 1000 new immigrants plus a similar number coming back from previous years. About 100 of these are refugees. What are the aspirations and concerns of these newcomers to Canada? What might they tell us, if we asked?

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People who are learning to breathe deeply; and honour diversity. Folks who are seeking to cut through the babble, and learn how to truly listen. Like leaven in the loaf, Pentecost people engage and uplift their communities

There is a Youth Outreach Program at Erin Mills United Church, a program which came about when some youth started skateboarding around the church. Parishioners complained about this - until their minister referred them to their church's mission statement. The congregation decided to reach out to the youth, resulting in the creation of OASIS, a summer drop-in with 140 youth coming into the church on a daily basis.

Here at First†Metropolitan, we would like to reach out to the youth of this city. For the youth who are here – especially those who are being confirmed – I want to ask you, if the Spirit is calling this church to reach out to the youth of our city, who do you think is going to be most effective in that activity? You are.

So if you want to live out the meaning of your confirmation vows, today and in the days ahead, then bring your ideas and your enthusiasm and your abilities and your questions and help us make this a place where youth want to come, where they will know they are welcome and where they can have fun and find meaning and have their lives stretched. This would be a great way for you share in the Jesus' mission.

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From the very beginning, Pentecost People have been prompted by the Spirit to continue Jesus' ministry. The very next chapter in Acts, chapter 3, opens with the heading "Peter heals a crippled beggar." Wait a minute! Isn't that Jesus' line of work. Now Peter is doing it.

And in the next chapter after that, Peter is defending his actions before the very religious Council that had sent Jesus to Pilate and to the cross. This coward who had skulked off out of the courtyard on the night of Jesus' arrest now makes a bold a defence of Jesus and what Jesus is about as can be found anywhere.

And so it is, whenever the Spirit moves amongst us. Thirty years ago, I came across the formula by which Moderator Bob McClure lived his life:

A = r & p. Adventure = risk plus purpose.

McClure talked about the need to risk much, but only for a worthwhile purpose. Therein lay the real adventure. As a young doctor in his 20s living in China, to get to the church clinic, every morning he

would walk across the compound and pass the grave of his predecessor, who had been shot by bandits. I guess he had found a worthwhile purpose.

At the time I first came across his formula, I was 24, just ordained, and for me, his partnering of risk and purpose has remained insightful for this adventure called ministry. I never had to do what Bob McClure did as a young doctor. But I do remember how shortly after arriving on my ordinand charge, a 14 year-old in one of the rural communities I served took a rifle to his head and committed suicide.

The family were not church-goers and we had never met. It was only the support of some church members that gave me the gumption to go over and call on the family. As it turned out, the family decided to have the funeral at our church. The very next Sunday, there was the mother sitting in church.

Whatever courage I had to muster to go over to her home earlier that week was certainly no match for the courage she now showed by coming to Sunday worship for the first time. I later discovered what had been the decisive factor in this woman's choosing to take that major step. It was quite simple, really, yet profound. One of her neighbours had quietly said, "If there is a time you want to go to Sunday worship, I'll go to church with you."

For those who will be taking a new step in their ministry this day, and for us who covenant with them, let us remember the gift of companionship. Even Peter did not speak or act alone. He knew the gift of a faith community. One of the Spirit's favourite ways to sustain us through all the challenges of life and ministry is to provide others to accompany us.

Sometimes these people step forward and identify themselves to us. Other times, we have to seek them out. Sometimes they are very much like ourselves and readily become soul friends. Other times, they are as different from us as night and day; yet the Spirit speaks and acts through them just as significantly.

I missed last year's Pentecost service. At the time, I was recovering from surgery for prostate cancer. And if, as our Moderator suggests, cancer cells are cells which have forgotten what they are supposed to be, my experience with cancer had the opposite effect – namely, it helped me remember.

"Once we were no people; now we are God's people."

"If there is a time you want to go to Sunday worship," the neighbour said, "I'll go to church with you." Why would she go and say a thing like that?