

May 31, 2009  
Acts 2:1-18  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick  
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## *Windblown*

One evening this past week a small group of us met with one of the members of our congregation who is moving to New York to live with his son because health issues make it impossible for him to continue to live alone. It was a poignant time of storytelling about each of our lives and about our times together. The Spirit was with us.

Generally, there is a lot of spirit talk these days which is often phrased, “I’m spiritual.” Or “I’m interested in spirituality.” For some people this amount of spirit-talk is unfamiliar.

Christians through the centuries have used Trinitarian language – God, Christ and Spirit - to talk about their experiences of the sacred, while at the same time affirming the unity of the holy. I know many people give ‘the puzzled look’ when talk of the Trinity arises. I think it’s important to remember it is language to try to describe the wide-ranging experiences we have of God’s presence. It is not a mathematical formula, 3=1.

On the other hand, there are examples of this three-in-one character in our physical world. You’ve probably heard this example before. God is like water, which appears in different forms – ice, liquid, and vapor, - but it’s still water. An example from quantum physics is the quark. I have read that if you have one quark, which is an elemental particle,

then you have three. It is a fascinating world we live in.

Although we live in a Trinitarian tradition I find that most people in their personal piety tend to focus on one facet of the trinity. They either use a lot of God talk, Jesus talk, or Spirit talk. Sometimes this focus will shift at different times in a person’s life.

The Spirit is that vaporous, elemental sacredness that moves within us and among us, encouraging us, sustaining us, and renewing us.

On this Sunday of Pentecost, which is seven Sundays after Easter, the focus is on the Spirit. (Jewish tradition held that the Law was given on the day of Pentecost which was seven weeks after Passover.) One of the central biblical images for Spirit is wind. In the Hebrew and Greek languages, which are the languages of the original biblical texts, the words ruah (Hebrew) and pneuma (Greek) mean spirit, wind, and breath all at the same time. How they are translated into English is determined by context, but it is still an interpreter’s decision.

Wind is a pretty broad category, so I looked on dictionary.com in the thesaurus section for synonyms for the word ‘wind’:  
air, blast, blow, breath, breeze, chinook, cyclone, draft, draught, flurry, flutter, gale, gust, mistral, puff, tempest,

typhoon, wafting, whiff, whirlwind,  
whisk, zephyr  
(dictionary.com)

Looking back on the gathering this past week where I said the Spirit was with us, I would say it was like a zephyr – a gentle breeze – comforting and affirming. A zephyr is a pleasant experience of being windblown, but you might not notice if you weren't paying attention. I must confess that is the kind of wind I'm hoping for at today's picnic.

However, there are times when wind cannot be ignored.

The first summer we moved to the Sonoran desert almost twenty years ago we experienced the biggest dust storm I've ever been in. Many, many years before that I had seen tumbleweed whipping across the prairies so fast and furious that we pulled over, but I'd never been in a real dust storm, where the wind is moving so hard and fast it picks the top layer of sand right off the desert becoming a giant dust cloud that infiltrates everything. You can smell it coming. You make sure the house is closed up tight for it leaves a layer of dust on everything. Afterwards you can taste it in the air. It is very dry.

Here on the coast of Maine when we know we are going to be windblown, we too make sure the house is closed up tight and secure all boats and ships. For us the wind is usually carrying lots of moisture and water particles infiltrate everything. It is very wet.

Pentecost was this kind of powerful windblown. *There was a rush of a violent wind, filling the entire house.* It infiltrated everything.

What will happen? Will the disciples snap in the wind, like a mast which has reached its breaking point? They have been through a great deal. Today we would say they are off the stress charts. Many had left family and friends to travel with an itinerant rabbi. Then, the person to whom they had disciples themselves had been crucified, and they were terrified. Then amazingly they had experienced his resurrection presence. And then he had left them again. What is to be become of them? How much more can they take? Can they bend in the wind?

A few years ago, when I finished my term as Moderator of the Southwest Conference, the man (John Leung) who was the Vice Moderator, who was born in Hong Kong, gave me a scroll as a gift. Those of you who have been in my office have had a chance to see it. It is an Asian image of bamboo. Loosely translated the words say, "Bamboo is strong because it bends in the wind." Wise words.

The disciples on the Pentecost day were like bamboo. They bent in that mighty wind and straightened up again to share the good news. The experience was so powerful we mix metaphors and say it set the disciples on fire. Wind and fire together are a force to be reckoned with. Everyone knew something was happening and the disciples are set loose to prophesy. That is why this day is designated as the birthday of the church.

And it is why Pentecost is designated in the United Church of Christ for the Strengthen the Church offering. This offering goes to support new church starts, renewal projects in existing churches, youth and young adult

ministries, nurturing lay and pastoral leadership, and the God is Still Speaking campaign. This offering helps to sustain and grow the witness of United Church of Christ congregations as they reach out to the wider community. It is one way we help each other to ride the wind of the Spirit.

With the symbolic significance of wind in our conversations about the Spirit, it's not surprising that birds are often seen as symbols of the spirit, since they ride on the wind. In scripture, the Spirit of God descends as a dove at Jesus' baptism. You've probably noticed how in television shows and movies a dove is often used as symbolic of a spiritual presence.

As most of you know, I will be beginning my sabbatical time tomorrow. Part of my time on sabbatical I will be exploring aspects of Celtic and Native American Spiritualities.

One aspect of Celtic tradition that relates to our conversation today is the wild goose. In Celtic tradition, the wild goose is symbolic of the Holy Spirit. The Celts, many living in fiercely windblown areas, felt that the dove was a bit too docile and delicate, whereas the wild goose knows what it was like to be truly windblown. They knew the truth of the statement - the wind blows where it will. For them wild geese were a significant symbol because they are wild and free. Yet they are not solitary.

Many years ago I came across a writing called *A Sense of a Goose*. The Author is unknown. It describes aspects of the life of geese and makes correlations to human community. Here are three sections of it.

1) "Next time when you see geese flying along in a "V" formation, you might consider what researchers have discovered about why they fly that way. As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately following. By flying in a "V" formation, the whole flock adds at least 71 percent greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own.

*People who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going more quickly and easily because they are traveling on the thrust of one another.*

2) When the head goose gets tired, it rotates back in the wing and another goose flies point.

*It is sensible to take turns doing demanding tasks.*

3) Geese honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

*What messages do we give when we honk from behind?"*

Honking from behind – now that's an interesting image for our life together. What messages are we giving when we honk from behind? If we follow the wisdom of geese, then they will be messages of encouragement, so that as we take turns doing demanding tasks, we will be able to move more quickly and easily in the common direction of following the way of Jesus.

So if you hear any honking at the picnic today, you'll know it's simply encouragement.

I hope you each have a summer full of zephyrs, with an occasional gust to catch your attention. And honk loudly and often.