

23 May 2021 Harbor Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Tom Wagner, “Spirit: Mystery, Freedom and Empowerment” Acts 2:1-8, 11-21, Luke 9:51-56

Today is **Pentecost** in the western Christian calendar. Eastern Orthodox traditions also celebrate the day, but due to using different calendars, the date often falls on a different day, as is the case again this year. It marks the day that Jesus’ first followers received the Holy Spirit, which is credited with the phenomenal growth of the then fledging movement. Indeed, it is commonly thought of as the birthday of the church. **Acts Chapter 2** is the **traditional account** of the day’s events. The second reading from **Luke 9**, though not among the lectionary readings for Pentecost, speaks of **discerning the spirits** behind our motivations and behavior. Portions of Jesus’ response may not appear in some of the oldest manuscripts, but the message sounds consistent with his broader agenda. I find it a **corrective** to the triumphalism that has long infected much of Christianity especially in the United States.

This morning I will begin by summarizing how the story of **Pentecost fits in the context of the New Testament canon**. From there I will move into the **Jewish origins** of Pentecost that set the stage for the Acts Chapter 2 narrative. This will include **linguistic & symbolic understandings** of “spirit” in biblical literature. Finally, I will share personal ruminations on “spirit” under the headings of **mystery, freedom and empowerment**.

The Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles compose a **two-volume set** in the New Testament canon. The canonical gospels record the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth from four different perspectives. The oldest and shortest, **Mark** presents Jesus as “the man of action”. **Matthew** presents him as “the long awaited messiah”. **John** speaks of him as “the man from above”. **Luke** presents **Jesus as “universal savior”**. Three of the gospels—Mark, Matthew and Luke--share a significant amount of narrative material, even down to specific phrasing, leading scholars to call them the “**Synoptic Gospels**”. (John is excluded from the group because 90% of his material appears to be independent of the other three.) Scholars widely accept that Matthew and Luke borrowed some material from **Mark**. Other material appearing in both Matthew and Luke came from a hypothetical document commonly called “**Q**” from the German word “*Quelle*” meaning “source” (No this Q has nothing to do with misguided minions of “he who shall not be named”). In addition, of course there is some material independently unique to Matthew and Luke. Luke’s narratives pay particular attention to **marginalized people** of society, **economic justice** and the work of the **Holy Spirit**. Luke also is particularly attentive to connecting his stories to **contemporary events**.

Most pertinent to our discussion today is that Luke is the only gospel author to write a **sequel**. One approach to the larger storyline on which believers and skeptics might agree is that Jesus started a movement, he was executed and the movement continued. **Acts** serves as a **selective history of the early Jesus movement as it expanded from its Palestinian homeland to the imperial capital of Rome**. Later parts of the story appear to be eyewitness accounts based on the author’s use of the pronoun “we”. Pentecost becomes the point at which those who followed Jesus of Nazareth stopped meeting behind closed doors and began reaching out to the surrounding society.

Pentecost has a deep history in **Jewish tradition**. It was one of three major pilgrimage festivals in Judaism, requiring attendance in Jerusalem: **Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles**. Passover, observed in the spring, commemorates the Hebrews’ **escape from Egypt**. Tabernacles or Booths, observed around the beginning of fall (at the end of the Jewish year), recalls the years of **wandering in the wilderness**. Pentecost is observed 50 days or seven weeks after Passover. Originally, it celebrated the grain harvest and was called the Day of **First Fruits**. The appropriate offering at the Temple was two loaves of bread made from the new harvest. It soon also became known as the **Festival of Weeks** (Shavuot or) based on the designated lapse of time after Passover. Later emphasis shifted to a celebration of **receiving the Torah** (Law) at Mt. Sinai/Horeb. From the 2nd Century B.C.E. on the Greek term **Pentecost** (πεντηκστής), meaning 50 came into common use. I suspect the long history of conquest, exile and **displacement of the Jews** was a factor in the transition from a harvest

celebration to a commemoration of the community's central revelatory text. That disbursement of the Jewish community throughout the Middle East and Mediterranean regions helped to set the scene for the **crowds of pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem** in Acts 2. Scholars believe **attendance of Pentecost** festivities in 1st Century Jerusalem was likely better than Passover, since sea travel on the Mediterranean Sea was safer later in the spring. Possibly the literary connections to the harvest and law giving themes of the Jewish holiday may have been in the thoughts of the apostles, but it is never explicitly stated.

Earlier, in the Passion narratives, Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection are associated with Passover. Therefore, it was an easy shift in Christian tradition to count Pentecost **50 days after Easter**. Both are moveable feasts. The first chapter of Acts notes that Jesus made **post-resurrection appearances during a 40-day period**, and then ascended into the heavens. Just prior to the ascension, Jesus instructs his followers to **wait in Jerusalem** to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. Even in those last moments, the disciples once again display their **misunderstanding of the mission** at hand, asking whether Israel will again achieve political independence. Essentially Jesus ignores the question. Don't worry about it. I have bigger plans for you. After you receive the Holy Spirit, you will **share what you have seen and heard**, not only in the Jewish homeland, but also to the ends of the known world. Then...10 days later...WOW! The sound of wind, tongues of fire, diverse languages spoken, and a new community formed.

In Greek, the word for spirit *pneuma* (πνεῦμα) can also mean **wind or breath**. The same is true for the Hebrew word *ruach*. Concerning gender, the Greek noun is neuter while the Hebrew is feminine. There is a sense of a force--a life giving force--that can be felt, but not truly seen. It recalls the **Spirit, or breath or wind of God moving over the face of the waters** in the first chapter of Genesis. It recalls the vision of the Prophet Ezekiel (Ch. 37) as YHWH **breathed life back into the valley of dry bones**. In the Pentecost narrative, the first manifestation of the Holy Spirit is the **sound of a rushing wind**. It is this sound that initially draws the crowds.

The second manifestation was the appearance of **tongues of fire** distributed among the members of the gathering. Fire too was a common element in Old Testament Theophanies, most famously in the **burning bush** of Exodus 3 calling Moses to lead his people out of bondage. It is also a reminder of the later pyrotechnical **display on Mt. Sinai** when Moses received the law.

The third manifestation was **the ability to communicate in a variety of languages**. Pentecost symbolizes a reversal of the curse of **Babel** in Genesis 11:1-9. As the story is told, once humanity shared a single language. Folks agreed to build a tower to heaven. Some scholars suggest it was a rampart intended to storm heaven. The structure would stand as a monument to human ingenuity and unite the population in a common purpose. After an on-site inspection, God decided to confuse communication among the construction crew, which ended the project. The linguistic miracle of Pentecost was not a restoration of a common language, but the achievement of **understanding** beyond usual boundaries. **Diversity need not doom us to division**. Rather it offers us an opportunity for dreams and visions among old and young, men and women—a time to re-imagine the world—repair divisions and share creation's gifts responsibly and equitably.

As promised earlier I want to turn to personal thoughts on the Holy Spirit. I might describe this section as something of a **word association game** in three parts.

The first word that comes to mind is **mystery**. I apply that word because there is something about the Spirit that is unknown and perhaps unknowable. I think of it in terms of walking in the dark or through a fog. I use the word somewhat advisedly. In our culture, the **mystery genre** in literature or film generally involves solving murder cases. Indeed the heroines and heroes of these stories, both professionals and amateurs, often work under a sense of **threat** hanging over their own lives and the lives of others. The unknown is often a source of **fear**. However, the sense in which I apply the word mystery concerning the Spirit is a bit less menacing. It comes closer to **the running gag in the movie "Shakespeare in Love"**. The phrase "**It's a**

mystery” becomes the answer for everything from when the theater owner will have money to pay his loan to questions of literary inspiration. It is at some level an **acceptance of mystery**—a willingness to live within it. **The unknown isn’t always a puzzle to solve.** Quantification and dissection have taught us much, Outside of geometry, sometimes the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Even cosmologists resort to metaphors to describe the processes at work in the universe. Much of what we understand about faith is spoken in metaphor. Job threw questions at the universe. YHWH responds out of the whirlwind, but doesn’t exactly answer the questions. We can’t know everything. There is also a sense that not everything is either/or or black & white. Some things in life are both/and or grey areas. Not everything has to be crystal clear. I am satisfied to live within the fog along the shoreline of life knowing that the mist nurtures life too.

The story is told of a Rabbi asking his students **how to determine the moment when night ends and day begins.** One student suggests it might be when one can tell the difference between a sheep and a dog from a distance. The Rabbi shakes his head, no. Another student offers that it might be when one can discern the difference between a sycamore tree and an olive tree. Again the Rabbi answers, "No!" The students then ask the Rabbi to give them the answer. The Rabbi responds, "**When you have enough light to look into another person's face and recognize him or her as your brother or sister. Until then the darkness is still with us.**"

This brings me to **freedom.** The Spirit is associated with qualities of **spontaneity and serendipity.** I think of Jesus’ comment to Nicodemus in John 3:8, “**The blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.**” Part of the ambiguity and mystery of the Spirit is that it isn’t a force to be controlled or manipulated for our own purposes. It is more something to which we surrender our wills. In **Acts 10**, Peter is both perplexed and perhaps reluctant to answer the summons to the home of Cornelius, a God fearing Gentile. Yet he acquiesces to the call. Near the end of the story, the Holy Spirit comes to even the Gentile household. Peter responds, “Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” Part of the acceptance of mystery is a **freedom from fear.** Threats still exist, but we gain the **courage to face the fear.** It becomes a freedom to **move beyond old boundaries and limitations.** It **challenges authorities and old customs** as the apostles did in many of the stories in Acts. It is a **freedom with responsibility for the good of humanity.** It is a freedom to live and work together.

While I’m not a Pentecostal or a Charismatic, I do find inspiration in the life of the movement manifest on **Azusa Street** in Los Angeles at the dawn of the 20th Century. These people **formed a racially integrated faith community with men and women in leadership.** During WW I many of their male members were **conscientious objectors**, some went to prison rather than serve. Sadly, that **early brilliance soon faded**, due to outside social pressures. Segregation and male dominance became the norm. The pacifist position was pretty much gone by WW II.

Again I want to return to the theme of freedom in a communal sense. I think of Civil Rights activist **Fanny Lou Hammer’s** quote. “**Nobody is free until everybody is free.**” I would add free *together*. **Freedom can only be freedom when it is shared, otherwise it is only privilege.**

Accepting mystery can free us from fear and free us to live for others. That **freedom shared** offers us more choices, agency and opportunity. **Pooling resources**—wealth, gifts, talents—allows us to do things we cannot accomplish as individuals. It is **empowerment.** I think historically how **Quaker meetings** sat quietly waiting and listening for the Spirit to speak in their midst. Then they would walk out that meetinghouse door and turn the world upside-down. In my own Dunker community, **Pentecost was traditionally the date for Annual Meeting.** It was a time for collective discernment. Decisions in the early years were generally made by consensus rather than majority rule. Much of the power and effectiveness of the **Civil Rights Movement** of the 1950s and 1960s came from community building during evening worship services. Carolyn’s story this morning about **building bridges of grass in Peru** was a great illustration of how we work better together.

One way to build a community is to **recognize collectively each other's talents and gifts**. In this way, we can mentor and nurture each other not only for the good of the faith community, but also for the common good of society. **HUUC** has done this well in the past few years, **calling out the talents** of members and people from other congregations and faith traditions. I think of the variety of people called upon to speak behind the pulpit in recent years or share musical talents. Yet, there are also people who do necessary work out of the public eye, who keep things working, even during pandemic conditions. All are needed.

While the Spirit remains somewhat mysterious to us, it can free and empower us to live together fully sharing the gifts of God's creation.

Sources

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