

May 20, 2018 (Pentecost)

TEXT: Acts 2:14–21

TITLE: Dare to Dream

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

If a friend asks you “Are you in good spirits?” you could say: “Yes, I feel good; I’m happy and optimistic.” Or “No, I’m not feeling good; I’m depressed and unhappy.” But if that same friend asks, “Tell me where your spirits are in your body and how they work,” you might find that question harder to answer. We commonly think of ourselves as a mixture of the physical and the spiritual—some combination of flesh, bones, muscles, and consciousness, thoughts, spirit—which is right and proper. But how often do we stop and ask where exactly does the spiritual part reside in us and how does it work?

Pentecost is all about the Spirit—the Holy Spirit like a wind blowing through a crowded room, or spirits of prophecy, visions and dreams. On some level, all of this makes sense. Even today, we talk about feeling the “spirit” of a room—whether people are attentive or adversarial. We can talk about athletes showing “team spirit” or people telling how a kind word “lifted their spirits.” So I need to be clear: Pentecost is not just a metaphor, parable or allegory. Something happened then that involved our small “s” spirits and God’s big “s” Spirit. Only if we believe that about the Pentecost of old will we be open to what God is doing right now.

So, to continue hearing this sermon, you need to shake off your materialist mindset—that skeptical inner voice that would tell you that you are only made of flesh and blood. You need to recognize that God’s Spirit is at work beside you and within you. And what better way to do that than with some words from our Presbyterian founder, John Calvin. Calvin once wrote this: *The whole world is preserved by the will and decree of [God], whose power above and below is everywhere diffused. Though we live on bread, we must not ascribe the support of life to the power of bread, but to the secret kindness, by which God imparts to bread the quality of nourishing our bodies.*¹ Bread alone doesn’t feed us, but rather a quality given by God to both bread and to us allows it to nourish our bodies. It’s like when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness and his response to the tempter was “Man does not live by bread alone.” There is something fundamentally true about that statement.

Now, next point: Is the presence of God’s Spirit intended to calm us or agitate us? The answer is both. At times our spirit, infused with God’s spirit, quiets our troubled hearts. We meditate—we become aware of our breathing—we slow down and follow the instruction of the psalmist who says, “Be still and know that I am God.” That is tremendously important, especially in our frantic, frenetic age. Having said all that, the fact is that if we look carefully at scripture, more often than not, God’s spirit moves in us to unsettle us—to fire us up—to shake off our lethargy and despair and to move us to new places altogether.

To be honest, we prefer it when God simply goes along for the ride with our physical body—when the Spirit tells us to slow down, to eat fewer carbs, get more exercise, and

stop to smell the roses. But God's constantly looking at the big picture and what we need to do now in order to get from "here" to "there," from our worldly present to God's future plans. And more often than not, that involves stirring things up.

We celebrate Pentecost once a year as a special day in the life of the church. But I'm afraid we are prone to sanitize something that was meant to be disruptive and troubling. Aveion, Sonya—by being baptized today, you have in effect shouted to a world fixated on flesh and blood, money and might, that you believe in something more—that you believe in a God made known in Jesus Christ and active through the power of the Holy Spirit. And both of you, plus Brianna, Kira and Kiara, have literally stood beside the apostle Peter when he announced to a complacent crowd that the Jesus who was crucified has been raised from the dead and it is he alone whom you worship and serve.

And to all of us: we gathered inside these walls and likely expected something traditional and comforting to be the Pentecost theme of the day. That's the spirit we associate with church—a spirit of quiet intercessions, of smiles as we pass the peace, of coffee hours and donuts and neatly preordained orders of worship printed on nice paper. Peter and the other disciples were inside their walls, having church just like that (minus the donuts and bulletins). But the Spirit had other plans for them. The Spirit that calms is also the Spirit that stirs. And on that Pentecost day, the Spirit moved them out from their place of shelter into a literal marketplace of humanity. It moved them away from shared platitudes to a messy array of foreign languages, immigrants, and hostile government powers. It chose not to reinforce the status quo, but to make real the coming kingdom of God.

And what was the sign of this movement, this disruptive agitation by the Holy Spirit? Three things: Dreams, visions, and prophecies. Of those three options, we are most comfortable with the first. We all dream; we imagine what it would be like to be on vacation on the beach. We fantasize what it would be like to have a royal wedding like Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. Winston Churchill once had a dream in which he discovered the secret of the universe and wrote it down on a piece of paper. When he awoke he was disappointed to read his immortal words: "The whole is pervaded by a strong smell of turpentine." (It didn't make any more sense to him than it does to us.)

Dreams are lovely things—full of aspirations and hopes. But you don't get to dream destinations without moving from where you are right now. God can't accompany you on the journey ahead if you're stuck in your church pew unwilling to move. That was true of Peter—it is still true for us. That's why you also need visions. If dreams are aspirations of what is to come, visions are road maps that guide us from here to there. When Peter was not sure about this blending of Jews and Gentiles in the new Christian community, he was given a vision that's described in Acts 10. A sheet was lowered before him containing all sorts of creatures, many which he'd always been taught were profane—not part of a faithful person's life-giving diet. But a voice told him, "*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*" When God wishes to bring people together, we are not to create walls of division. What God wants to unify, we are not to tear apart.

When Christ tells us to love our neighbor and show radical hospitality, why would we try to argue about the guest list?

Dreams fill us with hope—visions go further by clearing our eyes from the cataracts of sin, division and pride. But one thing more is needed: the voice of prophecy, of prophetic admonition. This is a special activity of the Spirit, making a way out of no way. In the beginning, the Spirit moved over the face of the chaos, pushing back its dark power so that life might emerge. In the time of oppression in Egypt, the spirit pushed back the waves of the Red Sea to open a path of liberation for the Hebrew people, blowing them toward the Promised Land. In our modern days of doubt and disarray, the Spirit moves us to speak prophetic words—not prophesying about future things, but prophetically calling out the wrongs of this age as seen in contrast to the righteousness of God. That’s the role of Spirit-led prophets.

When the world believed in slavery and Jim Crow, the Spirit called forth dreams, visions and prophecies to bring change in the land. That same spirit still calls us to denounce our new Jim Crow laws, our prejudicial criminal justice system, our lingering racist and xenophobic fears. When the world grew intoxicated on wine distilled from grapes of wrath and seasons of war, the Spirit of peace called us to a new way of life—of diplomacy and United Nations’ debates, of nuclear de-escalation and Doctors Without Borders. That same spirit incites us today to break our indentured servitude to the military industrial complex, to denounce the violent and murderous use of force whether by Israeli troops in Gaza or American drones attacking people in sovereign nations with whom we are not at war, and the foolish political narcissism that steps back from international agreements, casting doubt on both America’s leadership and trustworthiness.

Not so long ago, the Spirit led us to understand how greatly the church benefits when gender is no longer a barrier to congregational leadership, when heterosexuality is no longer treated as synonymous with personhood and the covenant of marriage, and when capitalist models promoting the sky’s the limit for success are balanced with Christian socialist models insisting there must be a floor beneath which no child of God is allowed to fall.

Calvin said God’s power is everywhere diffused. That includes each one of us and the space between us. God’s power moves as a spirit—a breath of life—a wind of change. It cares compassionately for the status quo but has no interest in preserving the status quo. Why? Because there is so much more to see and dream and hope for. The Spirit calls us to stir things up for good—for good for all. The one who was dead is alive. The old must pass away.

So, are we in good spirits? If by that we mean anxious for true peace, unsettled by the brokenness in the world around us, being faithfully led to dream, vision, and speak prophetically, ever hoping, as a God-blessed, Christ-redeemed, Holy Spirit-inspired people—then, yes, we in good spirits indeed!

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 263.