

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PENTECOST SUNDAY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“THE PRESENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT”
June 12, 2011
John 20:19-23
10:00 A.M.**

Pentecost is a reminder that we are all God’s children and that we are called to find unity within the context of our diversity. God is love; therefore, God does not love some groups, or nations, or races more than others. We build the walls and we decide who our enemies are.

The suffering and death of Jesus ended triumphantly in his resurrection from the dead. Our risen Lord appeared to his followers before his ascension. But what about us? How do we experience the risen Christ? How do we get access to the living Christ? Pentecost is God’s own answer to that question. The Spirit of God in Christ is with us, within us, and among us forever.

Remember, the first Easter ended with the risen Christ appearing to his disciples who, in great fear, were hiding behind closed doors. He gave them a commission and his own Spirit and they became the most courageous task force the world has ever seen: *“As the Father has sent me, so send I you.”*

When I was young my mother use to sing a song: **“Sometimes I feel like a motherless child”**. If you don’t feel particularly at home in this world, consider for a moment how seriously earth-bound you are. Something we cannot see, and take completely for granted, keeps us only minutes away from death. It is the air we breathe. **Oxygen!** If we go deep-sea diving or venture into outer space, we must take oxygen with us. The astronauts just returned from the space station. It was the oxygen aboard the craft that kept them alive. As soon as our oxygen is gone, we are gone as well! We are designed to breathe, and we do it unconsciously. Our amazing bodies are using something we cannot see, and seldom think about, to keep us alive from one minute to the next.

The first time I heard a poem about the creation, it was in church. The poem was by James Weldon Johnson. It was written nearly a hundred years ago in a language that black people could understand. As I share it with you, I want you to think about what the Book of Genesis has to say about how we are made. Genesis, chapter 2 tells of God making us from dust and breathing into our nostrils the breath of life. Listen to a part of it. **“And God stepped out on space, / And He looked around and said: / I’m lonely - - / I’ll make me a world. And far as the eye of God could see / Darkness covered everything, / Blacker than a hundred midnights / Down in a cypress swamp. / Then God smiled, / And the light broke, / And the darkness rolled up on one side, / And the light stood shining on the other, / And God said: *That’s good!?*”** Later, the first human is created. **“Up from the bed of the river / God scooped the clay; / And by the bank of the river / He kneeled Him down; / And there the great God Almighty / Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky, / who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night, / Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand; / This Great God, / Like a mammy bending over her baby, / Kneeled down in the dust / Toiling over a lump of clay / Till He shaped it in His own image; / then into it He blew the breath of life , / And man became a living soul. / Amen. Amen.”**

This dramatic image is repeated in the Bible. Job says, **“Remember that my life is a breath.”** (7:7) The psalmist says, **“Surely every man is a mere breath!”** (39:11) In Ezekiel the **“dry bones”** lived when God gave them breath. (37:10) Despite the absence of scientific knowledge, ancient people were obviously as aware of a connection between breath and life as we are. It is easy to see why they would associate breath with “spirit,” which they did throughout biblical times.

In his resurrection appearances Jesus began to fulfill the promises he had made in John 13-17: that he would come to them, give them peace, send the Holy Spirit, etc. A primary purpose of these appearances was to establish the identity and continuity of the earthly Jesus with the risen Lord. Also, these appearances would provide the disciples with a transition: from the seen to the unseen, from the temporal to the eternal, from the limited to the universal, and from the physical to the spiritual.

The disciples had already had two reports of Jesus’ resurrection, one from a disciple, presumably John, and the other from Mary Magdalene. But the disciples were still in hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. The report that the tomb was empty was no proof of a risen Christ and could be the work of grave robbers. The report of a personal encounter could be based on an hallucination.

Therefore, the appearance of Jesus to the disciples was extremely important. He stood among them, despite locked doors. He showed them his wounds. He blessed them and commissioned them. Then he *“breathed on them”* and said, *“Receive the Holy Spirit.”*

But this is John’s Gospel, not Acts! Pentecost is in Acts. This is less than twenty-four hours after the resurrection. Pentecost was fifty days later! **First**, we must remember that the Holy Spirit had been a reality in the world since creation. **Second**, John records the initial gift of the Spirit to the disciples as a gentle *“breath.”* Acts, fifty days later, describes the coming of the Spirit in powerful, kaleidoscopic terms. In each case the disciples were given what they needed and were able to receive.

Today we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit as the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to his disciples. We celebrate the experience recorded in John 20, when Jesus breathed on the disciples. We celebrate the more dramatic occurrence fifty days later, as recorded in Acts 2. Finally, we celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church, and in our lives, today.

How are we to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the life of this congregation? That is an appropriate question for this Pentecost Sunday. The Holy Spirit may be the most misunderstood member of the Trinity, and the most controversial. Many of the spiritual and emotional excesses in Christian history and practice have sought a home with the Holy Spirit. It is difficult to know what to make of the many different interpretations of the Spirit’s presence, manifestations, and gifts. In Will Campbell’s novel *The Glad River* there is this exchange: **“What you and your mamma fight about religion for?”** Kingston said, leaning on his shovel handle. **“That’s what religion is,”** Droops replied. **“Someone told me a man’s religion is what he’ll get mad enough to fight about.”** **“I thought religion was about God,”** Kingston said. **“God is about God,”** Droops said. **“Religion is about us.”**

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul did more than anyone to help us understand the Holy Spirit. His correspondence with the congregation in Corinth made it clear that the Spirit bestows a diversity of gifts, but all of these gifts are for the purpose of building up the Body of Christ. He makes it even clearer that all of the Spirit’s gifts are of no avail apart from the Spirit’s greatest gift, which is love. The breath of *true* life, which is the Spirit’s gift, is love.

The divisions that characterize our world are beyond numbering. All claim to want peace, but few are willing to make the necessary sacrifices for it to become a possibility. Wars proliferate and intensify. Poverty and hunger, disease and death increase wherever political conflicts are unresolved. The innocent, as always, suffer most. The worldwide situation proliferates despite the fact that peace is not that difficult to achieve where it is genuinely desired and earnestly sought.

We have been doing it for 100 years here at Park Hill, sharing the gift of the spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit is evidenced by “**Love**”. I pray that you are open to this extraordinary gift of love in your life. And because love is what we are about here at Park Hill, I would love to be your pastor. And I would love for this to be your church.

PRAYER FOR PENTECOST

Come, Holy Spirit, instill in us a desire to deepen our relationship with you, to listen for where your Spirit directs us. Come, Holy Spirit, breathe fire into your church today; move us from complacency to action, actively advancing your kingdom. Come, Holy Spirit, into the world, instill a desire in your people to care for all of creation so that the beauty of your earth can be enjoyed for generations to come. Come, Holy Spirit, and stir up unrest in our hearts for all those places in the world where water is unsafe to drink and where people go hungry for lack of food. Inspire us to do something that makes a difference. Come, Holy Spirit, bring peace to a broken world. Come, Holy Spirit, comfort those who mourn, heal those who are ill, bring light to those in darkness. We pray, trusting in your promise of new life in Jesus Christ, our risen Savior. Amen.