

What does this mean?

June 9, 2019 - Pentecost

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Today is the day we in the church call Pentecost. Pentecost is a day of dual celebration: we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, the “Advocate,” who is part of God and who lives in us so that we might better discern the will of God; and we celebrate the start of the Christian Church, its existence post Christ’s resurrection, and its mission. On this day, God sends the Holy Spirit to empower the church to continue to do the work begun by Jesus. Following the Ascension of the resurrected Christ, the Church no longer had the risen body, the actual presence of God. Instead we are gifted the Holy Spirit, and so the Church and all believers have the potential to be filled with the Life of God.<sup>1</sup>

In our text, this coming of the Spirit is anything but subdued. There is a strong sense of the liveliness and life of the Spirit—she does not arrive on a calm breeze, but as a mighty, rushing wind; as a power that fills a whole house; as a presence that verges on chaos; as tongues of fire. The Spirit came upon those followers of Jesus and gave them the power to speak in a variety of languages. This was not the kind of Spirit-movement that led to speaking in “spiritual languages,” but in the mother tongues, the birth languages of the many immigrant people who lived in that area. This would, perhaps, be akin to every elder of Armour Heights suddenly being able to speak in the native languages of every person living in the Armour Heights community: French, Spanish, Portuguese, Persian, Ukrainian, Arabic, Greek, Romanian, and so on. To be an immigrant—an outsider who is adjusting not just your language, but in many cases your way of life in a new place—to hear your native language being spoken would have been powerful. But even more than that, this story isn’t about people hearing all these unique languages and suddenly fearing diversity, but about the in-breaking of God’s purposes for all humanity, bringing humanity together in understanding, despite their differences.

Pentecost tells us the good news that our humanity, ruined and distorted in our distrust, has been restored in Jesus Christ. The Spirit that animated Christ’s life, that united him to God the Creator and empowered him to fully be the human image of God, is now shared with us. As one commentator puts it, “Thus the cacophony of voices becomes a chorus of praise, babble becomes communication, and community is fashioned out of potential adversaries.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rev Dr Gillian Straine

<sup>2</sup> Michael Jinkins

Now, that said, the movement of the Spirit in this rush of wind and fire wasn't immediately understood. It didn't lead to immediate community building and uncontested church doctrine and total agreement on church finances. While many were amazed by the phenomenon, they were also perplexed. "What does this mean?" they asked one another. What does this movement mean? What should we be taking from this? What does it mean that the gospel of Jesus Christ is being shared in all these languages, including my own? Some decided it wasn't a phenomenon after all; it was just a group of people drunk on wine at an unreasonable hour of the morning. But for others the question lingered: What does this mean?

We might ask the same question today: what does this mean? What does Pentecost mean for us as a church in the year 2019? Where do we sense the moving of the Spirit in ourselves and in our church body today? What difference does it make to live in the Spirit?

There is a group of people within the the Presbyterian Church who have been asking those questions a lot recently. This group has come together to form a new movement called Re:animate. I have had the pleasure of being a part of the development of this movement. The amazing part of gathering with people who are passionate about positive change and development within a church body, for me, is also feeling the Spirit as you work. The founding members of Re:animate felt drawn by the Spirit toward acts of courageous, inclusive and creative ministry within The Presbyterian Church in Canada. We recognize ourselves as a small and imperfect reflection of the Church, but animated by the Spirit, and inspired to gather in heart, mind and body to actively seek the Way of Jesus Christ by nurturing three core values within the Presbyterian Church: Courageous Leadership, Inclusive Community, and Creative Ministry. The purpose is to try and reanimate; that is, to bring to life, encourage, and inspire our church through the animating work of the Holy Spirit. It is a way of calling on the Spirit to help us continue the work that Jesus started all those years ago.

As we discern, the Spirit edges in with her life-giving knowledge, teaching, and advocacy. As we ask questions, like "what does this mean?" and truly open ourselves up, the Spirit leads our hearts and minds to the answers. And for Re:animate, this means finding new ways of being courageous leaders in our church, examining ways of being more inclusive communities, and not being afraid to play around and engage in creative forms of ministry. It's a movement, not a club. Movements don't require membership, they only require action. And, so, you are all invited to participate. This is a good thing for our church body, and something we hope to be a part of as Armour Heights. It is an easy way of seeing the Spirit in action. However, discerning the Spirit isn't always so straightforward. After all, some of those who witnessed the disciples speaking in a variety of languages didn't attribute the ecstasy with God, but with

drunkenness. Our stubborn humanness can sometimes block our ability to know God's will.

This past week the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada was held in Waterloo. This is an annual meeting of the highest court of our denomination. Ministers and elders representing every Presbytery from across Canada attended the General Assembly as commissioners. One of the biggest topics being discussed and voted on at this year's assembly was around the full inclusion of those who identify as LGBTQI in our church. Specifically, whether to not to allow the ordination and marriage of those identifying as LGBTQI. Some churches, our own included, have already been advocating for full inclusion for years. You can imagine, or perhaps even know personally, how difficult it is to not be fully included. Many in the church felt it was high time to extend inclusion to all of our siblings in Christ. While others felt that changing our doctrine was uncalled for. Tensions at General Assembly were high. On Tuesday, our commissioners voted and the majority chose a pathway of full inclusion. Many rejoiced —it was the outcome they hoped for but few expected to see happen... at least at this point. For myself, I thought "this is perfect! Full inclusion just before Pentecost Sunday?! My sermon has basically written itself!" It seemed that after so much listening and sharing and discerning, the Spirit broke through with a rushing wind and said "Yes! Inclusion is God's way forward!"

But then, in a rather heartbreaking turn of events, by Thursday an appeal was made from those who sought equal opportunity for both those whose beliefs and interpretations of scripture lead them to be affirming of the LGBTQI community, and for those whose beliefs and interpretation of scripture lead them to be unaffirming of the LGBTQI community, and the decision was changed. Now, as things stand, instead of our entire church body being fully inclusive, the church is given the choice: churches may choose to call ministers who identify as LGBTQI, or not. Ministers may choose to marry same-sex couples, or not. Though there are things that must still happen to make this official, in short, the new decision leaves us in a denomination that is both inclusive and exclusive. A church that both invites and rejects. For some, this is a perfect compromise. For others, especially those who identify as LGBTQI it is a way of sanctioning discrimination. For still others, it is perplexing: What does this mean?

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom in our hearts, but there can still be messiness in the church. Did the church misread what the Spirit was saying on Tuesday and correct it on Thursday? I honestly don't believe that. I cannot believe that God seeks a kingdom that is both inclusive and exclusive. But what did happen was a continuation from that first day of Pentecost: the church kept inviting humans in. And humans, as it turns out, aren't perfect. It's why we eat at the table together: we are not perfect and we need one another. We need forgiveness. We need Jesus.

In our scripture today, as people express their confusion and some insist that the disciples are simply drunk, Peter stands to preach. In response to the question, “What does this mean?” he explains that Christ’s followers are living the fulfillment of the long promise of God. God’s word is being heard, God’s Spirit is being shared, and God’s communion is being brought into existence among humanity here and now.

God’s communion is the Trinity: Father, Son, Spirit, eternal and living community, differentiated in person, united in love. We ourselves are created for community and never fully live in God’s image until we live in communion. Communion assumes difference—not uniformity, not conformity to a single idealized form of life, or nationality, or ethnicity, or sexual orientation, or gender.

Some might say that, in our communion with one another, in our accepting of differences, there is room for two parallel beliefs in the church: one that includes all and one that excludes some. Some might say “at least we took a small step forward” while others will say “we also took a huge step backwards.” Still others will say “What does this mean?” What *does* this mean for our church? What *does* this mean for affirming places like Armour Heights?

Ultimately it means we need to continue what we’ve always done: seek the discerning presence of the Spirit. Listen for what the Spirit is saying to us, saying within us, saying through others. It means we live in a human-filled church full of imperfections. It means less safety for those who identify as LGBTQI in our church. Which also means it is our task as members of this messy communion of Christ followers to continue, as a congregation, to stand up for those who are marginalized, discriminated against, purposely excluded and ignored; to continue to hunger and thirst for justice. It means we keep finding ways to move forward, to keep moving toward fulfilling God’s kingdom here on earth. It means we don’t give up, don’t give in, don’t grow stagnant, but also don’t grow so righteous that we forget to forgive, or forget to show grace, or forget to offer love.

The story of Pentecost challenges us to get out of our comfort zones and into the less predictable life that God’s Spirit may be pointing us towards. For, if we are to learn anything from the feast, it is to be open to Spirit of God, which is as dynamic today as it was at the inception of the Church. May we all listen for the Spirit whispering to us now and consider how we might be inspired to call out today and spread the hope and the love that God offers. Amen.