

May 15, 2016
Acts 2
“Living the Spirit”

We are rapidly approaching the wedding season. I know that I have at least three weddings to officiate at this summer including one next week. So, one of the issues sometimes with weddings is that the bride and groom want to get married somewhere, in a park, by a beach, near somewhere special and there is no church building and they don't want to deal with the unpredictable weather for an outdoor service. Well, believe it or not this problem has been solved by this [show picture] the inflatable church. This air filled building is 47 feet long, 30 feet wide, and 50 feet high. It comes complete with plastic “stained-glass” windows and airbrush artwork. Inside it can have an inflatable organ, altar, pulpit, pews, and candles if you want them. Even the doors are flanked by air-filled angels And in case you are wondering there is no problem with “high heels” since the church comes with a hard wood floor so there won't be any leaks.

Since the church fits in the back of a pickup truck and can be built in under two hours it is being used for more than just weddings. All sorts of other congregations use it to reach out to communities through VBS, praise services, or just worship where there may not be a church they can use. And so as we consider our text from Acts about the day of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit we realize that the early church was just as inflatable with the holy spirit and just as portable. That the early church was not at all about brick and mortar but about letting the Spirit lead and guide to make God's love real and known to the world.

We hear in our text, “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it

filled the entire house where they were sitting. Tongues of fire appeared among them as they were filled with the Holy Spirit.”

And we come today to invite this same power of God which inflates the heart, swells the soul, lifts the Spirit and makes us more than we ever imagined. The power and presence of the Holy Spirit that disturbs, delights, delivers and lifts.

For when God sends forth the Spirit, "the whole face of the earth is renewed." When God sends forth the Spirit chaos is changed into creation the Red Sea opens up to a highway of freedom. When God sends forth the Spirit: A young woman named Mary says "Yes". Jesus is born and life is never the same. When God sends forth the Spirit amazing things happen: barriers are broken, communities are formed, opposites are reconciled, unity is established, addiction is broken, people are renewed, races are reconciled, hope is established, people are blessed, and church happens.

Today, we come to be the church. To be that church filled with the spirit. That community of people excited and passionate and ready to put our faith into our action. Ready to see that God is at work in the world, just like on that first Pentecost.

That day of Pentecost where it was the practice for all Jews to return to Jerusalem for this important festival. And so, the disciples made this journey from Galilee in the north down to Jerusalem. And I wonder what was going through their minds. You see, fifty days earlier they have made the same trip to celebrate the Passover with their friend and master Jesus. And on that trip, Jesus was arrested, crucified, and three days later they experienced the wonder of the resurrection. And Jesus had appeared to them several times after that, but now he has ascended to heaven. And in their minds they are all alone. And they have to be wondering, what's next?

What are we to do now? So, they come to Jerusalem, this very small deflated band of followers, small because they are not talking to many people, they don't want a high profile, they don't want the Roman authorities to arrest them like they did Jesus.

So they come together into a room in the bustling and bursting city of Jerusalem. Into a darkened room with the doors and windows shut. They come together to pray and ask for the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to be with them, to guide them, to show them what's next and what's possible. And all of a sudden there is this sound like a violent wind, like a train rushing by the window and the doors and windows were blown open in the gale force wind that filled the room. And then the disciples saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. And in that moment something wondrous and wonderful happened as they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Now to many people this experience sounds a little strange, sounds scary, and can be hard for us to understand what really happened. The Pentecost experience just doesn't seem logical and it's just hard to believe in our scientific minded world. So for me, I look at what the result was of being filled with the Spirit. Before Pentecost the disciples were afraid to speak, now Peter steps out of the room and speaking in the languages of the world proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ. Before Pentecost, the disciples were fearful, fickle followers who could not be depended upon even to stay awake while their Master was praying. After Pentecost, they were willing to face persecution, even surrender themselves to torture and death in order to testify that this same Master had been raised from the dead. Before Pentecost, they were a small band of scared followers. After Pentecost they created a movement that has spread around the world as the church was formed by the Spirit power. It is clear something profound happened.

And they went wherever the Spirit led them. Just like that inflatable church, they didn't wait for people to come to them they went out into all the world, to meet people, to listen, to walk with, to offer healing and hope, a message of a new and eternal life with Jesus.

To be inflatable is to be spirit filled and spirit led. Holy Spirit. The Greek is *hagios* [holy] and *pneuma* [a breath, or a gentle wind]. So a better translation might be Holy Breath or Holy Wind.

And I think Holy Wind is much closer to the reality of God's third person. A wind moves things. Think of leaves blowing around on a blustery autumn day or snow blowing in a blizzard. Think of the loud flapping sound of a flag on a flag pole on an unrelentingly windy day when you think the wind might rip the flag right off the pole. Think of the wind filling the sails of a sailboat and moving it swiftly through the water. Wind is about movement.

And that is the message for us this day – we are not meant to stay still or stop – we are meant to be in movement and be a movement for hope and peace as we share the love of God one person at a time. As we invite and surrender and be open to let the Holy Spirit *lead us*.

For the Holy Spirit has been described in many ways.

As breath that blows away the dust and makes everything clean - refreshing cool water to a parched throat - a potter who starts with an odd-shaped lump and molds and shapes it into something beautiful – like a renovator who uses what is already there and strengthens, refreshes and revitalizes what's there – like a loving spouse whispering reassurances of love and support – like a parent guiding and helping a confused child - like a tour guide who points us in the right direction to see things that we would otherwise have missed – like a gentle tap on the shoulder that makes us realize, "Hey, that's me that needs a new beginning and new direction." The point

is - the Holy Spirit is all movement and change and transformation. For the Spirit revitalizes, renews, refreshes, empowers, creates, reminds, guides, comforts.

I saw this story of a man named John, who works with gangs here in Milwaukee neighborhoods where there has been violence. So, in neighborhoods where many of us would roll up our windows and hit the accelerator on our cars, John got out of his car and did a new thing. He walked the streets building relationships very slowly with members of various gangs. His church wasn't one building but the corner markets and diners or even a front porch. Over many months he broke down barriers of mistrust so that he could bring together the leaders of various rival gangs to meet and agree to a truce. Over time, the amount of violence in some of these neighborhoods dropped. Many of these gang members are now attending bible study and some have even gone to recovery groups to get clean and turn their lives around. How did this happen? With one man open to the Spirit – willing to be used as an instrument for peace - to see the need - to step out and do a new thing. For the Holy Spirit calls us, just John – just like these men and women he works with, just like those first disciples in Jerusalem, to be more than we are and to join in the work of transformation of hearts and lives already going on around us.

To be led by the Spirit doesn't mean we are to always do grand things. What it means is being open and willing to be put in places to make God's love real. Because we never know what could happen. Once there was a man who felt led to begin a weekly worship service outside the church in the local nursing home. While the service was going on this old man in a wheel chair rolled over to where he was standing and took hold of his hand and held it all during the service. He thought about removing his hand, but thought what's the harm. And so, this was repeated the next month and the next month and the next month and the next month

and the next month. Then they went one Sunday afternoon and the man wasn't there. He asked the nurse in charge, "What happened to that man?" "Oh," she said, "He's near death. He's just down the hall, the third room. Maybe you should go in and visit him. He's unconscious, though."

He walked down and went into the room. There were tubes. The man went over and took hold of the hand of the gentleman in the bed. Led by the Spirit in that moment, he said a prayer. And when he said "Amen," the old fellow squeezed his hand. He was so moved by this that tears began to run down his cheeks. He stumbled out of the room and as he did so he bumped into a woman. She said, "He's been waiting for you. He said that he didn't want to die until he had the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time." He was amazed at this. He said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, my father would say that once a month Jesus came to this place. 'He would take my hand and he would hold my hand for a whole hour. I don't want to die until I have the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time.'"

So, being open to the Spirit may lead us to do big things like change a neighborhood or something as simple as holding somebody's hand, to be Jesus for somebody. But what does happen when we are open to the Spirit – is we become incarnational people – people making God's love real. For in our Gospel lesson, Jesus is talking about the gift of the Spirit. And he proclaims – "Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these" And so what are these greater works?

You see, when Jesus was here in the flesh he was only able to look into the eyes of one person at a time; only able to express love personally to one person at a time. But when the Holy Spirit comes into our lives and fills us we are connected to a larger power and led to a

greater love. Now if thousands and thousands of people go out tomorrow morning and each of them performs one act of love in his name, then it can be said -- you can hear Jesus uttering these words -- "The work that I do you are doing and you're doing it greater than I did it because thousands are greater than one. I could only love one person face to face at the time. But there are thousands, yea, millions of you now and each of you at any given moment can love someone intimately and powerfully in my name."

And so we need to be connected, inflated, spirit filled to be those conduits of holiness and vessels pouring out God's love, mercy, forgiveness, and hope into this world. That is what Pentecost is all about. I like something that Robert Schuller wrote in the introduction to one of his books. "How much is a sprinkler-head worth?" he asks. "It all depends. Not much on a shelf in the hardware store. But attach it to a water line and it will bring life to plants, flowers, and fruit, feeding the human race. Life and death--they're in the sprinkler head. "How much is a pen worth? It all depends. Whose hand holds it--and what that hand does with it. "What is a human being worth anyway? It all depends. A disconnected human life is a waste. But connected to a community, to an uplifting faith in a loving spirit that flows from the living heart of Jesus Christ, this simple person, one among many, becomes a powerhouse of life-giving hope". I urge us all today to make time to be in prayer, just like those first disciples, as we open ourselves up and trust in letting the Holy Spirit lead us and guide us and fill us and use us. Let us with open hearts be connected to let this spirit power transform us and through us the world. O Spirit of the living God descend on us we pray. Amen.