

Sermon: Pentecost

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Year A
Numbers 11:24-30
Psalm 104:25-35, 37
Acts 2:1-21
John 20:19-23

Maybe you've had this happen in your own family... you're on a road trip... the kids are in the back seat... you've tried to provide things to keep them occupied and entertained... and before long... one of them says loudly... almost as if in pain...

Mom... Tommy breathed on me!

There's a certain kind of intimacy people share when they're in each other's personal space... when their shared journeys and stories chip away at those things which keep us at arms length... sitting close to each other in church pews... sharing a chair that's made for one... sleeping more on one side of the bed than on two... I've even noticed that over a long time... some couples not only begin to speak and act alike... but may even begin to resemble each other... so much time spend in each other's aura... in each other's energy field...

Some of you heard me tell this story at a St. Aelred service two years ago... sometimes Joel and I will be sitting around, and he'll say to me "What?" And I'll say, "What do you mean "What?, I didn't say anything." And he'll say, "But you breathed like you were going to say something." And he's right. Not a single... even partial... utterance passed my lips... but he detected just the slightest change in my breathing... the slightest change when your brain sends a signal to your mouth... and your mouth just hovers on the edge of getting ready to speak... and in this intimate moment... my breath is known... I am known...

And we become aware of the patterns of breath... of inhalation... exhalation... inspiration... expiration... we're aware of when breath ceases... and the Spirit leaves...

The disciples were in the house... and the doors were locked... when Jesus came... when the Spirit came... the doors were locked... so he said: *Peace be with you*... the same reassuring words spoken by angels... to assure God's people that all was... and would be well... and he breathed on them... the God / Man who taught by example... who was an embodiment of divinity... of The Way... whose disciples were known and loved... who gave his life for his friends... and who was resurrected... breathed on them... the verb *to breathe*, occurs only here in the Christian Scriptures... and in this one action... when the Spirit came... the divisions created at the Tower of Babel were healed... and like God breathing life into the *Adam*... the earth creature... Jesus breathed new life into the disciples... new life that would carry them into ministry... And he said: *Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*

This forgiving and retaining of sins may remind us of what the Pharisees said to each other... *Who can forgive sins but God alone?* And it may be that Jesus gave the disciples this kind of authority... but what Jesus also gave them... what the Holy Spirit *had to* give them... was the power to let go of a grudge... or hold on to one... if you retain them... they are retained... they gained the freedom of *not giving* their power to someone who didn't appreciate it... when he sent the seventy out... he said: *if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you... and when you enter a town and they do not welcome you, wipe the dust off your feet as you leave that town.*

When Jesus came... the disciples were locked inside for fear of the Jews... when he breathed on them... he breathed the life and love of God... he gave them God's peace... his breath was a sign of the intimacy he'd shared with them...

These days... we don't live in fear of the Jews... there are other things to fear... gun violence... economic instability... mysterious diseases... change itself... and we may reject works righteousness... but do we know how to jump into the river of trust... and trust the Holy Spirit? When I was on my CREDO conference a few weeks ago... we heard a story that can help us tap into this trust... and I share it with you now...

Once upon a time there were some fish that lived in a very small puddle of water. Every day, the little fishes would swim in circles and hunt for water bugs. Their stagnant puddle was cradled between the roots of an ancient oak, just beside a swiftly flowing river. Life never seemed to change for the puddle fish.

But one morning as the fish swam in circles and hunted for water bugs, there was a sudden noise: SPLASH!

An amazing, brightly colored fish had jumped into the riverside puddle. This large fish had blue and red and golden scales. And what was most unusual for this particular puddle of water – he was smiling!

At first, the frightened puddle fish huddled together at the edge of the puddle. Finally, one of them asked, "Where do you come from?"

The Sparkling Fish smiled brightly. "I come from the sea." "The sea? What is the sea?" asked one of the braver puddle fish.

The Sparkling Fish shook his head in surprise. "No one has ever told you about the sea? Why, the sea... the sea is what fish are made for!" He rubbed a golden fin against his nose, puzzled. "How can I explain the sea to you? Well... it isn't like this little puddle; it's endless.

A fish needn't swim in circles all day, for one can dance with the tides. Life isn't lived in the shade – the sun arches over the waves in silver and crimson! And there are many splendid sea-creatures, such as you can hardly imagine. It's endless and sparkling and clear. The sea is what fish are made for!"

A pale, grey puddle fish spoke up. "How do we get to the sea?"

The Sparkling Fish pointed towards the large black root that lay close to the river's edge. "It's a simple matter. You jump from this little puddle into that river and trust that the current will take you to the sea."

The fish in the puddle of water were astonished. At long last, a fish swam forward with a hard experienced look in his eye. He was a Realist fish.

The Realist Fish looked down at the muddy puddle bottom and frowned. "It's pleasant to talk about all this sea business, but if you ask me, we have to face reality. And what is reality? Obviously, swimming in circles and hunting for water bugs."

A look of distance mingled with pity crossed the face of the Realist Fish. "It's all pie-in-the-sky nonsense. Of course, I sympathize with you. You undoubtedly dreamed this up because of some trauma you suffered as a little guppy. But life is hard. It takes a REAL fish to face facts."

The Sparkling Fish smiled. "But you don't understand. I've been there. I've seen the sea. It's far more wonderful..." But before he could finish speaking, the Realist Fish swam away.

Next, there neared a fish with a nervous twitch in his tail. He was a SCARED FISH. He began to stutter. "If I understand y-y-you, we're supposed to j-j-jump into that river over there?"

"Yes, for if a fish wants to go to the sea, the way lies through the river."

"B-b-but... have you looked at THAT RIVER OVER THERE? I'm just a small fish! That river is deep and strong and wide! Why, a small fish would be swept away by the current! If I jumped out of this puddle, I wouldn't have any control! No! I just can't..."

Finally, there swam out a figure who seemed very solemn and learned. He had been in this particular school of fish longer than anyone else. He was a Theologian Fish. Calmly, he swam to the middle of the puddle and adjusted his spectacles. Setting down a small shellfish podium, the Theologian Fish pulled out a sheaf of notes from his vest pocket. Then he smiled at the puddle fish. "My dear students, our distinguished visitor has expressed many views which certainly merit consideration."

Then, he bowed respectfully to the Sparkling Fish. "But, my dear colorful friend, let us be reasonable..." He glanced down at his notes and then his smile brightened. "We can work this out. Why not form a discussion group? We could meet every Tuesday evening at seven o'clock and I'm certain that some of the puddle fish would be happy to get the hall ready for us and bring coffee and donuts."

The eyes of the Sparkling Fish were sad. "No, this will never do. Talking is important, but in the end it is a simple matter: you jump. You jump out of this puddle and trust that the river will take you to the sea."

From somewhere above the muddied waters, a sparrow was singing. The light in the eyes of the Sparkling Fish shone with a bright urgency. "Besides, don't you know summer is coming?"

The puddle fish murmured. "Summer is coming? What difference does that make?"

The Sparkling Fish pointed towards the sun. "Summer is coming. The spring rains filled up this little puddle to overflowing. But, this little puddle is going to dry up some day. No puddle lasts forever."

The puddle fish were stunned but the Realist Fish swam out. There was dark contempt in his face as he spat out his words. "You're just trying to scare us! You're one of those end-of-the-puddle fanatics!" He swam away in disgust.

But then all of the colors of the Sparkling Fish – blue, red, and gold – brightened into a warm glow. He whispered, "It's a simple matter. You jump from this little puddle and trust that the river will take you to the sea. Who will come and follow me?"

At first, no one moved, but then a few puddle fish swam to his side. Together they jumped into the river and the current swept them away.

The remaining puddle fish were quiet for a long time. Then, once again, they began to swim in circles and hunt for water bugs.

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Pentecost is understood by many to be the church's birthday... but what we celebrate today is not really the church's birthday... the church as an institution didn't begin that day... what we commemorate today is the beginning of a movement... people marked with the cross... and spirit of Christ... people in community who are connected in Spirit... who speak blessing and take back curses...

Our biggest task in this life... is to trust that God loves us... and when we trust this completely... believe it... and experience it... it changes us...

As our two congregations move ahead together into this new thing... let's ask ourselves how the Holy Spirit can help... and everything else falls into place... after all... the Spirit knows when we're about to speak... even before we utter a single word.