

## Alive in the Spirit

Notes for a sermon by Steve Halsted

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Community United Church of Christ

I don't know about you, but when I was growing up parents seemed to do some things that made absolutely no sense to me.

Number one: Several of my friends grew up in homes where you were not allowed to actually sit on the living room furniture unless it was covered by a sheet, or it was a special holiday, or if you had company over like Grandparents!

Number two: How many of you grew up in a home where you had those special little towels in the bathroom? ... The ones that no one can use except the guests, and even then the guests don't like to use them because they're stiff from all the fancy embroidery, and they're so new that when [guests] wipe their faces with them they get all that new towel fuzz all over them.

Number three: How many of you remember that little bowl of decorative soap in the extra bathroom? You know, that bar of soap that came in the shape of a conk shell or starfish, that never got used but just sits there for 15 years, and then gets thrown out, only to be replaced again, but this time in the shape of a turtle or frog?

Now, the living room furniture,  
the guest towels,  
the decorative soap...

what do these have to do with Pentecost? Well, not a whole lot except that they, like Pentecost, are nothing that we seem to use on a daily basis. Sure we have them on hand, there – for special occasions, there – for someone else to use and enjoy but nothing we use with any regularity!

For we mainline Christians, this whole subject of “Pentecost” is like the frog-shaped soap in our theological home. Or it's like the “good china” that we pull out once a year and then whisk back in to the cupboard until Pentecost rolls around next year.

We're like the usher in the stately, grand church who, upon seeing a visitor raise their hands during the singing of a hymn, went over and said, “Sir, can you kindly tell me what you are doing?” And the man said, “I just feel like I got the spirit.” And the usher said, “Well, you certainly didn't get it here! Now would you please put your hands down. You're starting to scare the other worshippers!”

When it comes to the elusive and mysterious “Spirit,” we're somewhat like the girl in a Sunday School class in a church I served in Massachusetts whose teacher asked, “Would you like to be a better person?” The girl replied, “Yeah, but not for too long.” Isn't that how we sometimes approach the Holy Spirit?

We want God's Spirit around, at least we feel as if we're supposed to want God's Spirit around, just as long as that Spirit behaves itself, sort of like Casper the Friendly Liturgical Ghost, who watches over us and keeps us safe from harm, but doesn't ask us to leave our comfort zone.

But the minute we start talking about a Spirit that breathes fire and makes you speak a strange language that you yourself don't even understand, we start backing for the door!

And so in an attempt to tame the Spirit (as if we could), we keep this Pentecostal passage from Acts neatly folded and put away on the top shelf of our Biblical linen closet; only to pull it out on special occasions.

The Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock - a "preacher's preacher," so influential, like the Rev. Dr. Peter Gomes, on students aspiring to learn the preacher's craft – Dr. Craddock, as the story goes, was lecturing at a seminary, but before he got started a student in the audience stood up and said, "Dr. Craddock, before you being I'd like to know if you're Pentecostal?"

Dr. Craddock replied, "Well, okay, but what do you mean by that? By asking me if I'm Pentecostal, do you want to know if I belong to the Pentecostal church?" The student said, "No, I want to know if you're Pentecostal."

And Dr. Craddock said, "Okay, are you asking me if I'm charismatic?" The student said, "No, I want to know if you're Pentecostal!"

And Dr. Craddock said, "Do you want to know if I speak in tongues?" And the student said, "No, I want to know if you're Pentecostal!"

So finally, Dr. Craddock said, "Young man, I'm not sure I know what you mean?" And the student in frustration said, "Well, obviously you're not Pentecostal."

You see, when Christians use the word "Pentecost" as a noun, as a word that names a specific time and a specific event in the life of the church, the word behaves itself, at least in the way we define "behaving." As a noun the word "Pentecost" is comfortable with itself. It stands up and tells us who it is.

But when the word "Pentecost" assumes the role of an adjective, well, it gets a bit nervous, and it runs around looking for something to modify. Then the word "Pentecost" becomes the word "Pentecostal" and we become less certain, like Dr. Craddock, about what it means exactly!

As a noun, it refers to something that happened at the beginning of the life of the church and is a reference point for all Christians, reminding us that God has, and God will continue to speak to each of us in ways that each one of us can hear, because this is the miracle of Pentecost, "that those gathered there on that day heard the gospel, each in his or her own tongue."

Pay close attention to how this was accomplished. Notice that it does not say that God conjured up one big fireball of a flame and rolled it down the center aisle so that the end result was that everyone there would be able to hear the gospel in one language that everyone could understand.... Instead it says that the Spirit of God came to each person as a separate flame, dancing over each person's head, causing each person to hear it in their own way.

And once we realize this, Pentecost is not so scary, no so unusual after all!

You see, it is not insignificant that Luke who wrote the book of Acts, emphasizes the fact that when all the nations of the world were gathered to hear the gospel for the first time, the beginning point was not the preacher, but the listener, "and each of them heard, in their own tongue, the message of the gospel." Think about it... where have we seen this kind of sensitivity to the listener before?

Thank about how Jesus taught the people. Did he begin by describing to them the indescribable riches of heaven? No! He began with their experience, and ours, by speaking to them and to us, in parables, earthy stories about lost sheep and lost coins, and prodigal sons, and prodigal fathers, and a woman at a well, and mustard seeds, and bread, and salt, and light...stories designed not to boost the preachers reputation, but stories that would help the listener to understand what the realm of God was like!

Jesus spoke to them, not in a “you can only sit on it once a year living room furniture” kind of language, but in an “old worn-out rocker on the back porch” kind of language.

Nor did he present them with a “one size fits all, fireball gospel.” He listened to their stories, and - like a librarian who knows the contents of every book on the shelf, goes to just the right one, and pulls it off a shelf to give it to the person so that they may “check it out” – so that they may hear the “good news” in a way that is particularly helpful to them. And when we realize this, we see that the ministry of Pentecost is equivalent to the ministry of Jesus’ parables...meeting people where they are with the good news!

In fact, Pentecost is so central an event in the life of the church, it reaches back farther than just to the life and ministry of Jesus.

At what other time did God speak to someone in a very personal way through fire? Remember the burning bush...”Moses, Moses, take off your shoes Moses, for the ground you are standing on is holy ground.”

Isn't it interesting that every time God speaks to someone through fire, God speaks not in some general way, but in a specific, personal, loving reassuring way, because not only does God share with Moses what God wants him to do, but God encourages Moses, supports Moses, binds up Moses' wounds of insecurity, and guilt and shame, in the most personal way possible, by reviewing with Moses the deeply personal events of his life, as if to say, “Yes, Moses, I know everything about you, what you've done and left undone, but you're still the person for the job.”

Any time God speaks to us through the holy, refining fire of God's grace, God is speaking in a sacred language that most of us don't use every day – the language of unconditional love!

Which is why, of all the gifts of the Spirit that I consider the most Pentecostal, it isn't speaking in tongues, but rather the gift of empathy.

I believe that to be a “Pentecostal” Christian means that if you're a white person you're actively trying to understand what it is like to be black, so that you may better love each other, and vice versa.

To be a Pentecostal Christian means that if you are one who has enough resources to live and then some, you listen to one who is poor long enough, not just to understand but to feel for them, so that you may love and serve the and vice versa.

To be a Pentecostal Christian if you are a straight person means to be willing to sit and listen to the story of a gay or transgendered person long enough so that even if you don't comprehend fully their journey, you still come to understand their humanity, their personhood, so that you may better welcome and affirm them and vice versa.

To be a Pentecostal Christian means that when we see the plight of women and men and children in disastrous situations like tsunamis, or hurricanes, or tornadoes, or

like the most recent cyclone in Burma (Myanmar) we respond out of empathy for their loss, and want to save them from future harm.

What this means is that by virtue of our inclusive and welcoming and healing mission, fueled in our struggle for justice and peace, that the UCC is as "Pentecostal" as any other church in America! Can I get an AMEN?

Again, the Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock, who I heard preach once in Albuquerque at a sister Disciples of Christ church, tells of the first church that he served in the Oak Ridge area of Tennessee, and when a new power plant was being built, a great many new people moved into the area - engineers, day workers - and they were living in tents and mobile homes as the plant was being built. Rev. Craddock called upon the church to welcome these new folks. One week later, the church had a business meeting and voted. They voted that in order to become a member of their church you had to be a property owner in the county.

Rev. Craddock said that some years later he and his wife were traveling back in that area, and they went by the church. The church, he said, was still there, as pretty as ever, and the parking lot was full, but there was a new sign out front now, not for the First Christian Church, but one that said, "Bill's Bar-B-Que!"

And Dr. Craddock said, they went in, and there were "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Capadocians, Arabs" ... all there, but they weren't welcome when it was a church!

One of the things I am so grateful for is that this church has sought to be and is such an inclusive welcoming place. We have found Christian unity even within our diversity. And yet there are always new horizons for God's people as we learn to practice the art of empathy and hospitality. To be Pentecostal Christians!

May we be ever-ready to listen to the holy winds of change, and experience the holy tongues of fire that keep us "Alive in the Spirit." AMEN