***SIGHS, SNEERS, AND SURPRISES***

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Texts: Romans 8:18-27 and Acts 2:1-13

What comes to mind when you hear the word *spirit*? In the halls of high schools there is a lot of talk about *school spirit* at certain times of the year, though not at this time of year when graduation and summer vacation are on students’ minds! *Spirit* can describe a general attitude or outlook as in the beatitude: *Blessed are the poor in spirit* or the description of one as being in *high spirits*. S*pirit* can bring to mind a ghost, an otherworldly being summoned at a séance or hanging around a haunted house or visiting Ebenezer Scrooge in the middle of the night. At the local tavern *spirits* has another connotation, with which some of you may be far too familiar. But for many of us who frequent this sacred space, *spirit* evokes thoughts of a particular spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God present in our midst.

Pentecost is the one day in the church year when you expect to hear something about the spirit, specifically the Holy Spirit that blew through the upper room in Jerusalem where the disciples had gathered and chased them out into the streets with good news on their tongues in a multitude of tongues. Pentecost is a day for the Spirit to be the center of attention. We sing spirit-filled hymns and read spirit-filled passages and expect a spirited sermon, and well we should! But too often that is the end of it; we celebrate Pentecost as if the Spirit was a derecho blowing through, turning things upside down and leaving confusion in its wake before blowing out to sea and disappearing into thin air. The Spirit could not be contained in that upper room that first Pentecost, and neither can our understanding of the spirit be limited to that day in that place two thousand years ago. The Spirit blows where it will, blows across the cosmos and across the centuries, and while Pentecost stands out as the example par excellence of the Spirit’s work, the Spirit works in a lot of other ways too, some akin to those other understandings of spirit that seem to have nothing to do with church or God or Pentecost.

In Greek the word for spirit is *pneuma;* it can be translated as *spirit* or *ghost*, but it can also be translated as *wind* or *breath*. It is the root from which we get pneumatics and pneumonia. *Pneuma* is unseen but very present, like the wind you feel on your face, an energetic force whose impact can be heard in the rustling of leaves and seen in the flight of a kite and experienced in the breath of life. The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost is a stunning, holy pneumatic event, but so too is every breath that you take – and you probably don’t appreciate that, until you can’t breathe! It is only when you’ve lost your breath and regained it that you appreciate the difference that the *pneuma* makes – the difference between life and death!

According to Luke, not everyone was so impressed with that power of the *pneuma* that first Pentecost. When the disciples burst out from behind closed doors into the streets of Jerusalem, filled with the Spirit and telling of the wonderful things God was doing, many people were amazed at what they said and how their words could be understood in a multitude of languages. But there were a handful of folks who just sneered and suggested that the disciples were filled, not with the Spirit, but with spirits of another kind – new wine. That was a more plausible explanation, and there are always skeptics out there, doubters who feel bound to the world as they know it and deny that any kind of holy miracle is possible. They believe no deathbed conversion stories, deny any miracles, resist any holy moments. And I wonder: are you one of those skeptics?

Scripture is full of such skeptics who God uses to do wondrous things – Sarah laughed at the possibility that she might bear Abraham’s child in her old age; then her pregnancy test came back positive. Gideon tested God three times before he would believe that it was God calling him to lead the people against the Midianites. Naaman could not believe that washing in the Jordan seven times would heal him as Elisha said, but it did. Thomas doubted that Jesus could have been raised from the dead until he saw with his own eyes.

A colleague of mine who served a church in Tennessee went to visit a parishioner in the hospital who had recently been diagnosed with a cancerous tumor. She asked him to lay hands on her and pray for healing; he was happy to pray but a little reluctant to lay hands on her, but he did. Immediately she began to gather up her things. “What are you doing?” he asked. “I’m going home. You healed me!” she said. “No,” he said. “You are sick and need to stay here and let the doctors treat you!” “Not anymore,” she responded. “You healed me.” “I didn’t heal you,” he said, “I just laid hands on you and prayed.” “Well, then God healed me,” she said. “Anyway, I’m going home.” After much persuasion, Chris finally convinced her to stay and have the doctors check her out. The doctors did a scan and to their amazement, the tumor was gone! She was healed, and my friend was awed and scared to death at what had just happened. Chris had no illusion that he would be a source of healing for that woman that day, but the Spirit working through him was able to do what he could not do, what he didn’t believe was possible.

Those doubters at Pentecost could not believe what they were seeing and hearing, and so they attributed it to new wine. But it was a Spirit of a different kind that was at work, enabling the disciples to speak and the people to hear in their own languages. What they heard was what great things God was doing, and the very presence of the disciples in the streets was living testimony to that power of God at work. Would you have been one to be amazed at what God was doing there or would you be among the skeptics, sneering and wondering what the disciples had been drinking? Can you believe what you haven’t seen with your own eyes or heard with your own ears or reconciled with the rules of reason by which you know the world works? How do you explain miracles that happen in our lives that defy explanation? What do you do with holy happenings in our midst? Might you, rational person that you are, be open to the possibility of the presence of the Holy Spirit blowing in and inspiring something new and different and even miraculous to happen – not just long ago and far away, but here and now?

Faith trusts that what may seem impossible or improbable is sometimes true. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not see.” Faith is believing not just what your eyes see or your ears hear or your head reasons; it is trusting with your heart. As you have heard me say before, it is not just believing someone could push a wheelbarrow across a tightrope stretched across the Grand Canyon; it is getting in the wheelbarrow!

Today some of our confirmands come to join us in this wheelbarrow we call church. In the statements of faith they presented to Session they shared what they believe, but they also shared some of their doubts which are questions with which we all wrestle from time to time. Joining the church is not having it all figured out. It is trusting God as revealed to us in Jesus Christ and present with us by the Holy Spirit and then agreeing that this is the place and these are the people with whom you want to grow in faith and wrestle with the doubts. What then do these young believers believe about the Spirit? Listen to a couple of them:

* *I believe in the Holy Spirit, who is God with us now and tells us what is right and wrong.* (William Fessier)
* *We as people can embody the will of the Holy Spirit and change the world for the better.* (Andy Hostetter)

What they state so well is what happened at Pentecost – God’s Spirit present in the midst of those disciples then and there, urged them out from behind closed doors to change the world for the better, gave them words to say and inspired people of all nations to understand what they said. The disciples’ very presence in the street, out from behind the safety of closed doors, embodied the Spirit’s will; they were the vessels through which God was at work in a powerful way to share good news with the world that day. That is what the Spirit did and it is what the Spirit continues to do; the Spirit energizes and empowers us to do what we cannot do alone, to change the world, not just two thousand years ago in Jerusalem, but here and now – with us, as enthusiastic or reluctant as we may be! And God knows – the world needs some changing for the better!

Baptism is a sign and seal of that Spirit’s presence in our lives, the Spirit that kindles faith in us, the Spirit that empowers us, the Spirit that intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words when we don’t know what to say or pray. When we walk out through these doors the Spirit goes with us to inspire us to do what we cannot, could not, would not do alone – change the world! In that sense, every day is Pentecost, for every day is a day filled by the Spirit, a day we go to share the good news and tell the story of Jesus, a day we go to change the world for the better! Amen