

Walls or Windmills?

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
May 22-23, 2010 ● Pentecost Sunday
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Acts 2:1-21

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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."

All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

* * * * *

"When the day of Pentecost had come, [the disciples] were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind..."

Acts 2:1-2

The traditional prayer for Pentecost is "Come, Holy Spirit, come!" But what in the world are we supposed to do with the Holy Spirit when it comes? That may not have been a burning question for you this week, but it's the burning question for Pentecost Sunday. We gather today and our worship space is all spruced up with splashes of red, the color for Pentecost. We gather today to celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, in our church, and in the world. We gather today to celebrate the birth of the Christian church, which was born on the winds of the Spirit. We gather today to pay attention to and to give heed to the Holy Spirit, which is still the very power of God at work in us and through us. We gather today to seek anew the Holy Spirit, that pulsing wind, that red hot fire stirring us and empowering us for love and good works. We gather today to celebrate God's life-giving, breathing Spirit!

But my guess is that underneath all the excitement about celebrating the Holy Spirit and Pentecostal power, we probably have to admit that we're a bit uneasy and a tad uncomfortable about all this "spirit" stuff. We're much more comfortable with God and Jesus. We worship God; we follow Jesus. But the Holy Spirit? The Spirit just seems to too unpredictable, too uncontrollable, and way too risky!

Like the people on the day of Pentecost in our Acts story, all of this spirit stuff is both amazing and perplexing and we wonder: What does it all mean? And perhaps more specifically, we wonder what might happen to us, if the Holy Spirit got loose in here, or was loosed in our own lives? Would we start shouting, speaking in tongues, dancing in the aisles or jumping chairs, getting happy in church? It can be quite disturbing and unsettling and raucous when the Spirit gets loose! That's why the Celtic people of Scotland and Ireland preferred the wild goose as a simple of the spirit, rather than the gentle dove.

Think with me for a minute about this wild goose image for the Holy Spirit: Did you know that geese in formation can fly much faster and farther than they do individually? Geese are regarded as disturbing nuisances by some, creating noise at moments that are often inconvenient, and creating messes that are not welcome? While their gait is awkward, in flight the wild goose displays grace and beauty. Wild geese exemplify an outrageous wildness as their great wings beat with exceptional power implying the capacity to achieve the apparently impossible. Wild Goose as symbol for the Holy Spirit! I like it.

But what do we do with this wild goose, Holy Spirit? Of course, we know that there are varieties of religious experience and varieties of worship – Quaker silence, low church informality, high church liturgy, and explosive "charismatic" worship. And I guess that God must like the variety, as long as it is done to praise and honor and adore "the one in whom we live and move and have our being." But for us mainline, "thinking-type" Christians, what do we *do* with the Holy Spirit? And for goodness sakes, what do we do *when* the Holy Spirit gets hold of us? What will people think? You can only imagine what people will say: He's lost it! She's got a bad case of religion! They've gotten a little too carried away by the Spirit over there at Cross Creek.

It happened at the first Pentecost. The people were gathered for a festival, like some big church service or some big camp meeting. Then suddenly the Spirit got loose, and they were filled with energy and ecstasy. They heard a sound like a mighty wind, shaking the room where they were sitting. But what would it sound like to have a mighty wind rushing through this place? How do we comprehend this sound? A Xenia tornado? A gentle whisper?

At Pentecost the people also saw what seemed like flames of fire bursting all around them. They spoke in different languages, and miracle of all miracles, they understood one another. Peter preached a spectacular sermon, and 3000 additional people started riding the wind of the Spirit. It was an amazing day, and they never got over it. And neither have we. Out of that wild, frenzied enthusiasm, the Christian church was born. And we're gathered here today because the Holy Spirit got loose then and is still getting loose now.

But what do we do when the Spirit gets loose? What do we do when the Spirit gets hold of us? I am intrigued at both the amazement and the resistance present in our text. Some were open to what was exploding around them and "*were amazed and perplexed*", wondering what all of it meant. There was no denial of what was taking place. They were just trying to make sense of it all, and that is always a good place to start. But others "*sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'*" It seems this group would rather ignore and deny what was going on. Perhaps hoping it would all just go away, like a bad case of indigestion. Maybe some were a little of both, intrigued and resistant at the same time. But what do we do when God's Spirit gets loose in that rush of a mighty wind?

Recently, Robert Parham, founder of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, TN spoke some interesting words about the wind blowing and I am pleased to share some of his thoughts today on this Pentecost Sunday.

(Robert Parham, "CBF's Future: Walls or Windmills?" <http://www.ethicsdaily.com/news.php?viewStory=15999>, posted April 30, 2010)

He noted an old Chinese proverb that says "When the wind changes direction, there are those who build walls and those who build windmills."

Wind is a *cultural* metaphor for change.

Today, John Bengson reminded us of Bob Dylan's song about change blowing in the wind.

The rock band Kansas offered nihilistic words about wind and change: "Nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky. It slips away, and all your money won't another minute buy. Dust in the wind. All we are is dust in the wind. All we are is dust in the wind."

Gone with the Wind (1939) captures in four words the swift collapse of a culture.

Wind is also a *biblical* image for change.

A violent wind ushers in Elijah's experience of God on Mt. Sinai and changes everything. (I Kings 19:11) The wind alerts Elijah to God's presence which is followed by a gentle and quiet whisper and he is changed forever.

The Psalmist intoned that the Lord "came swiftly upon the wings of the wind" (Psalm 18:10).

In Hosea, "For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind" (Hosea 8:7).

The gospel writer John recalls Jesus saying: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going" (John 3:8).

"And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind" (Acts 2:2).

When the wind blows, or God forbid, when the wind changes direction, there are those who build walls. And unfortunately, Christian response to the blowing of the wind has often been to be wall-builders. And by golly... we are good at it.

Insisting the sun revolved around the earth was a wall.

Building a "Creation" museum to insist that God created in six literal 24-hour days was a wall.

Supporting slavery and the idea of "separate but equal" was a wall.

Making the Cleaver's the model for the biblical family and June Cleaver the model for motherhood was a wall.

Refusing to ordain women to Christian ministry was, and still is, a wall.

Declaring that Jesus is the only way to God, and refusing to honor the God-experience in other faith traditions, is a wall.

Barring gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people from full participation in the life and ministry of the Church and fighting against full equality in our civil laws is a wall.

Passing laws that permit racial profiling in an effort to combat illegal immigration is a wall.

Denying forgiveness is a wall.

Waging war and doing violence is a wall.

Fear and hate are walls.

I think you get my point. Wall-builders, Christian or otherwise, seal themselves off. They resist change. They retreat from constructive engagement.

Many people have played with the idea that "the stone age didn't end because we ran out of stones. The stone age ended because we found a better way." And recently I heard another analogy. People didn't stop communicating with each other because people stopped using phone booths. People simply found better ways to communicate. We are communicating with each other now MORE than we ever have. And when it comes to the wind of God, Christians must learn to trust the better way the Spirit, rather resist and retreat.

Winston Churchill once quipped that "the Americans will always do the right thing . . . after they've exhausted all the alternatives." And I think that is true of Christians too. We will always do the right thing...after we have exhausted all the alternatives...after we have stopped resisting the powerful wind of the Spirit and started harnessing it. A better way than wall-building is windmill building. A better way than resisting the wind of God is to harness *Her* power.

I used "Her" power intentionally. Did you know that the Hebrew word for God is *ruach*. It literally means breath or wind. And in the Hebrew, it is a feminine word, lifting up the feminine side of God.

In a hot, flat and crowded world, windmills are preferable to walls. But please don't confuse windmills with pinwheels. Pinwheels react to change. Pinwheels spin round and round. They often come with pretty colors, but without productivity. However, windmills respond to change. Windmills are productive. Windmills harness the winds of change. Windmills turn wind into power. As a symbol, windmills signal that we be a *responsive* people, not a reactive people. Windmills suggest that be an *innovative and risky* people willing to live into the wind. And in our day and time, windmills represent connectivity and the promise of new and renewable energy. And after what we have witnessed happening in the Gulf of Mexico and the giant oil spill, windmills seem much more hopeful.

Windmills will be connected to an energy grid that shares power across the entire nation based on fluctuating conditions and needs. Each windmill will contribute to and benefit from its connectivity to the shared energy grid. Call it a synergistic relationship of mutuality.

Parham said that the challenge at the macro level for goodwill [Christians] is tradition, temptation and timidity of wall-building. We can build walls or we can build windmills. Investing in windmills shows a greater commitment to the future – the future of innovation, the future of productivity – than maintaining the status quo.

"When the wind changes direction, there are those who build walls and those who build windmills."

Friends, the wind is blowing. The Spirit is leading us. Something important and life-giving is stirring among us. Will you...will we...as Cross Creek Community Church harness this wind, or will we resist it? That is our Pentecost question...

Amen.