

## ***God's Spirit pushes, people pull***

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Those of us who have worshipped on Pentecost Sunday before likely appreciate the significance of this story. This day, Pentecost, is actually also a Jewish holiday called the Festival of Weeks, Shavuot, 50 days after Passover. God's burning bush that once beckoned a reluctant Moses now descends upon a group of peasant Jewish followers of Jesus.

French painter Jean Restout II painted *The Pentecost* in 1732. It dominates a wall of the iconic Louvre museum in Paris; approximately 15' x 25' in size, it was once even larger, with a dove descending from above, but it disappeared during the French revolution. This piece of art captures the drama well.

I love the contrast of emotions: There is Mary, the mother of Jesus, so at peace amidst the chaos. But then there are the apostles, the Pentecost Spirit falling upon them, generating emotions in the men, here, ranging from wonder in some to downright fear in others, as the Spirit is unleashed like fire upon them, pushing. We might surmise that more than one of those followers of Jesus are pulling. That is, judging by their faces, they might be wishing they could put a safe distance between themselves and that fire.

Don't we do the same thing at times when faced with moments we cannot make sense of; how often is our instinct to pull, when Spirit falls around us? Faced with awe and mystery, how often do we clamour for a reasoned explanation instead of "going with it"?

Spirit is powerful and unnervingly unpredictable according to Luke & Acts: Spirit enables the disciples of Jesus to preach; Spirit catalyzes numerous wonders, and signs, and healings; it inspires people to share their economic resources, and it gives them great courage when facing threats.<sup>1</sup>

There was chaos, which I think we experienced while the Pentecost story was read. Chaos is disorienting, but, when divinely inspired it is transformative. Another thing God's Spirit does among Jesus' followers in the book of Acts is to push the disciples **out**.

Bible scholar Amy G. Oden says that, "this gift of the Holy Spirit that marks the birth of the church is a gift expressly for those outside the Jesus movement, those who had lived displaced in a language-world not their own."<sup>2</sup> God's Spirit also has the power to gather outsiders together, to knit them together as community, inspiring followers of Jesus to speak in languages they had not previously known.

Cynical onlookers who might have dismissed this disturbance as a bunch of drunk revellers, they hear their language spoken. How can that be?! When I travelled for the first time, alone, I spent a night in a hostel in Florence, Italy; it was a beautiful monastery offering hospitality to young nomads like myself. I sat in the dark wood-

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<sup>1</sup> "Theological Perspective", David P. Gushee. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* - Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).

<sup>2</sup> Amy G. Oden. Commentary on Acts 2:1-21, June 9, 2019. [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

paneled dining hall, everything feeling so unfamiliar, an experience intensified by the din of many conversations in languages I did not understand. I was digesting this moment, when I heard something, familiar. I heard English, my language. But not just that, it sounded like *Canadian* English! I sought out those voices, and we enjoyed a meal together. It turned out that the travellers were from my childhood hometown of Oshawa, one of them who lived in the same neighbourhood where I grew up!

So what do you think? Is God's Spirit still hard at work today, descending upon us, perhaps in very unpredictable and powerful ways? For our modern, rational mindsets and our need to control, this Spirit theology threatens to take us into unfamiliar territory. I'm going to wonder aloud now with a question Dr Oden offers:

*If we were filled with the Holy Spirit here at St Andrew's,  
what language might the Spirit be teaching us to speak  
so that those in this neighbourhood could understand  
their mother tongue?*

So, what new vocabulary (new tongues) might God be nudging us to learn in our individual lives – reaching out to a person or group of people?

What is the language we as a community of faith here, now, are being called to learn in order to speak and to live out Gospel Good News in downtown Sudbury? Perhaps learning the language of poverty? The language of people on the margins of our community is a difficult one for me, of the middle class, to learn to speak sincerely, authentically. How about you?

How about learning the language of addiction, mental illness? The language of the prevailing culture is judgment, cost effective, quick solutions that suit those in power. So, I offer this prayer: Come Holy Spirit, push us towards compassion, love, even as our instincts might be to pull back to what is comfortable. Spirit inspire us to learn new tongues, the language of outsiders, that we might celebrate diversity, radical inclusivity in our homes, and at this, your Table where Christ welcomes all. Amen? Amen.