

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017
 Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's an ordinary day there in Jerusalem - the devout Jews have gathered for another festival feast – celebrating new life, new crops, the giving of the law. A large crowd has gathered from the ends of the earth for this annual celebration – but this day turns out to be anything but ordinary.

This year it's 50 days after Passover – 50 days after the events of Holy Week – from the Passover meal Jesus observed as his last supper with his disciples, the darkness of Good Friday, the spectacular joy of Easter morning, after Jesus appeared to his disciples in the Upper Room, after he gathered one last time with his disciples, after the Ascension – 50 days of life changing, world changing events. Maybe life is returning a bit to normal after these events – but is it? Can it ever be the same? This gathering does turn out to be a celebration of new life but unlike anything this crowd has experienced before.

We've seen displays of God's spirit in the Bible before of course – even with the “Special effects” – like Moses on the mountaintop, Jesus transfigured – these displays, though, were reserved for only a few witnesses – the most inside of the insiders.

Not this time! This is all new. Today, at the coming of the Holy Spirit, on what we have come to know as the birthday of the church, the crowd is called to spread the good news to the ends of the earth – not just for those disciples gathered in a room, not only the holiest or most faithful, not only the believers, or those who were with Jesus on the road or witnesses to his resurrection. No, right now, right here everyone is invited and included: male and female, old and young, slave and free – all are welcome, included in receiving this gift of the Holy Spirit.

And just to make sure everyone knows they're included, the sound of a multitude of languages is overcome by a sweeping wind and an uplifting Spirit – divided tongues as of fire descended on them – imagine what it would have been like to experience that! How is it that each one heard words in their own language: in their own languages they heard about God's deeds of power! Eloquent, impassioned spokespersons for the gift of new life, the beginning of a brand new era in which God is fulfilling promises and salvation draws near! For everyone! The world comes together! Not just the insiders: everyone – everyone heard words that before had sounded like just noise – those words have become filled with meaning.

Everyone – after the fire and the wind and the Spirit touched them and entered them – everyone started to do things they had never done before. They were made new – brought to life – in a new way – the events of Babel have been reversed!

In the midst of this spectacle, there were then and still are those who sneer from the sidelines, watching, “They must be filled with new wine.” But, remember what Jesus once said about new wine that bursts old wineskins? Rebecca Gaudino makes a wonderful observation: “These new followers of Jesus – the scripture tells us that the

church expanded from 100 to 3,000 in one day – talk about a megachurch! – these new followers aren't filled with new wine – they are the new wine! Watch them burst the seams of convention.” Wow.

Transition times are always challenging, even hard, aren't they. And this time was no different – there was so much joy and excitement and also wonder and confusion. This Pentecost event – the birth of the church - was a strong, joyful start to what would be a long tough journey filled with threats and danger, threats and danger which continue today – but also filled with communities of faith working together to create a world like Jesus embodied. The journey was not, is not, without struggles and resistance to change – but they and we are never alone. As we, like those Pentecost witnesses, work together to become the people of God who God intends us to be; we, like those witnesses, find our strength in community and prayer as we work together to create that new world that Jesus taught. Now we're part of an entirely inclusive community.

We are in a transition time here in this church, aren't we. We too know the anxiety of change, of transition. We're in the midst of a Pentecost event ourselves.

We are surrounded by the red colors of Pentecost – think of them as the flames of new life just waiting for all of us – as individuals and church! Look at them! Feel the heat, feel the energy, feel the possibilities!

We are the new wine!

How does this Pentecost story relate to the life of our church today?

How do we see this story as both our challenge and our strength to create that new world that Jesus teaches us about?

How can we reach across the many differences in our own congregation to create a unity – not a uniformity? We have differences not only in language and culture, but also in religious upbringing and traditions, educational backgrounds, and basic personality types. How do we communicate effectively right here – to listen and learn – to hear what it is that God is still speaking today, bringing us a call that may surprise us and gather us into a church more effective and more amazing than we've ever been before? What loud noises and rushing wind do we need?

Yes, we know we're facing challenges here at St. Paul's – but especially after this week I'm more than ever convinced that the Spirit is indeed among us, speaking and challenging and encouraging us to look forward with hope and enthusiasm.

We had a wonderful Church council meeting Tuesday evening – the seats were filled around the Table in the Social Room as we gathered to deal with some important business items at St. Paul's – but it wasn't just the business we accomplished that made it so great. First on our agenda was to discuss our call to walk together this interim period – my initial call was to expire on June 1 – it was renewable, but it seemed important to spend some time talking about that. Bottom line is this: we agreed we all wanted to allow the Holy Spirit to breathe on those embers of life in this church – to nurture those embers to become flames, that we are willing to do our part, in partnership with the God who loves us all, in moving forward into our future, to be a “go for it” congregation. Around the table every person said, yes! And it was my joy to be part of that conversation – and yes, we renewed my call to walk together with you, this congregation, for another year.

We talked about the coming of the Nutley Family Services Food Pantry being housed here for 5-6 months during their time of renovation. We talked about offering a

Vacation Bible School this summer – Christmas in August to children in our community and in partnership with the Rutherford Congregational Church. We talked about some new worship experiences during the summer – maybe midweek instead of hot Sunday mornings. And, we committed to doing some critical maintenance on our building – authorizing expenses up to \$20,000 – to replace rotting wood in the tower, to seal up the holes in the tower, to find the problems causing the water damage we experience every time it rains hard – to find the problems and fix them – to fix broken gutters. A hard dollar investment in the future of our church.

That meeting was a real Pentecost event! Thank you to members of the council and others who came to participate, for taking a risk and going for it, responding to a call to bring new opportunity for our community, new life in our church.

What other risks are we being called to take as church, as individuals?

We are the new wine! Let's burst those old wineskins! With the flames of the Spirit shining forth around us, among us, the possibilities are endless!

A story of another church:

A young woman sat in her bishop's office talking about her first call to a church after seminary – it was to be to a small, largely aging congregation. She listened for a while but said that her dream had always been to work with children and their families – is this really the right place for me? Well, she began her ministry at this church with some hesitation – the congregation was wonderful but she longed for her dream of ministry to children and families to come true. One day she had a chance to visit a new mother and her baby in the hospital. They talked and suddenly she heard the mother say, "It's so hard to do this alone – we're so far from family support – I wish my mother and my husband's mother were closer so not only could we get help when we need it, but so my daughter would know what it's like to have extended family especially grandparents nearby."

A lightbulb - I'd call it a spirit filled Pentecost moment - went off in the young minister's head – she had a congregation full of men and women who would love this! And so was born a ministry of visitation, of outreach to new mothers and fathers and their babies. It wasn't long before the church was filled with these young families – new wine burst forth!

The spirit of God that has come at Pentecost is a transforming power that creates a new life, a new community, a new church and a new world! Do we have the courage to let that Spirit run loose in our lives, as individuals and as church, indeed throughout our world which so desperately needs that transforming power?

That Spirit of God is with us in good times and in bad times. The strength of that Spirit will uphold us all – things happen that have the potential to paralyze us. This week the community of Nutley suffered a great loss when one of our High School Seniors died unexpectedly on Thursday night. She was a friend to our youth – and the shock and pain is widespread among us all. We offer our love, sympathy, and prayers to her family and friends - and we offer ourselves to be instruments of healing for all who loved Jillian, for this town, for all our youth and all those who care about our children and youth. By the strength of the Holy Spirit, we will get through this tragedy – we will get through it together. All of us can be a beacon of light, the flame of hope, the warmth of compassion – and all of us can give the gift of listening, of being aware that there is unspoken pain

and hurt all around us – God calls us to share one another’s joys and burdens – the Holy Spirit gives us the strength to do that.

This Pentecost story tells us that it is at times like these when we are experiencing a dead end and see no hope for our future, it’s at times like these that God who is the life giving spirit starts to work for and in us, if we let it happen. The life giving power of the Spirit creates life where there is no life and will bring into being a new person, community, a new church, a new world.

God is still speaking! The wonder of Pentecost continues to this day. We can’t put new wine in old wineskins, no matter how hard we try. And giving the Spirit room to run in our lives can bring about amazing things.

What other creative opportunities are just waiting for us as individuals or for us here at our beloved St. Paul’s Congregational Church? What new ministries are waiting to be born? What dreams do we have? Where and how are we stuck? As individuals? As church?

I hope you feel the wind of Pentecost blowing through us here and now? I hope you feel that wind of Pentecost blowing through us, telling us not to be afraid but to be alive in the Spirit, telling us to see the future not as a problem but as an opportunity, telling us to “go for it?” Friends, we can do this! With God’s help, we can do anything!

Howard Thurman says, “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” And I’d add, what this and every church needs is people who have come alive in the spirit! Let go of the old wineskins and trust the spirit!

What is it that makes you come alive? What gives you a transforming sense of joy? When have you felt that breathtaking glimpse of the Spirit breaking in to your very soul and calling you forth, creating something wonderful and new!

Feel the wind, see the flames of Pentecost surrounding us. Feel those flames of Pentecost burning inside you! Take the risk and go for it! Dream the dreams! See the visions! And above all, call upon the name of the Lord!

And this church will become an even brighter beacon of light in a hurting world. Every Sunday, indeed every day, we, this church, gathered and scattered, will be full of the Pentecost celebration.

We’re all here together in one place, too, like those early disciples, trying to discern what God is calling forth from us. We need each other to be church at its best. In fact, we need each other to be church *at all* - for being church is never an individual effort. We are the new wine!

May the God who sent the Holy Spirit on that first Pentecost bless all of us here this morning. May that powerful spirit rekindle in each of our hearts a deeper faith, a firmer sense of our ministry, a commitment to God and each other, and a joy and peace that passes all human understanding. So may it be for us all!

Let us pray: Eternal God, give us courage and commitment to let your winds blow through us and to let your life be revealed among us. Empowered by your Spirit, may we care for the needs of all people, break bread together with joy, and praise you day by day. Grant us your peace through Jesus who lives among us. Amen!