“A Spirit of Questioning”

A Sermon by The Rev. Rachel Wildman

Pentecost, 2018

Today is the feast of Pentecost—the day in which we celebrate the Holy Spirit! We are drenched with powerful images of the Spirit. From ShanShan’s glorious swooping dove, to the flames of fire on our altar frontal!

Indeed, we get many different images of the Spirit in our worship this morning. In additon to the image of the Spirit as a dove, drawn from Jesus’ baptism when the Spirit descends and proclaims him The Beloved, with whom God is well-pleased, we get the Spirit as the hand of God bringing Ezekiel into God’s own presence, as the creative force in our Psalm, as Advocate, Helper, Guide, and Truth-teller in John’s Gospel. I have been attracted to each of them as I have contemplated their inclusion in this sermon over the past few weeks. Each captures a different aspect or understanding of how the Spirit lives among us, and what its purpose is. The diversity of images has led me all over the place, and I have struggled to find a common thread in which to ground the Spirit so that I might better be in relationship with it.

That is, until last week, when Helen Pulizzi preached. For those of you who did not get the pleasure of hearing Helen preach during Youth Sunday, she spoke about the value of this community in her formation as a young adult, as a disciple, and as a leader. And community was the operative word in her preaching. She didn’t preach about this church building, or a few people within it, or a single program she participated in, or a single defining role she took on, like nursery assistant. She preached about all of it—this entire community—as the gift which has formed her.

Helen’s sermon has been wonderfully reverberating in me this week, and as I have allowed it to ring, it has enabled me to see that the connective tissue through all of the myriad accounts of the Spirit that we get on this Pentecost day, is Community. The dove descends on Jesus after his baptism amidst John the Baptist’s community that has come together for their own baptisms. The Spirit brings Ezekiel into God’s presence not to remain there alone, but to literally breathe new life into the remnants of the community that lay before him. The Spirit in our Psalm creates not just one, but “them all”. Jesus’ promise in our Gospel reading this morning that the Spirit will come is not to a single disciple, but to the entire community of disciples. And that is born out in our Acts reading, where we are told that not only were the disciples all together in one place when the Spirit descended an enabled them to speak in languages that were not their own, but also that there were devout Jews from every nation present in Jerusalem at that time to hear. In Acts, the Spirit comes to a community and then is shared with a community.

What we see at our celebration of Pentecost, of the Spirit, is that the Spirit is revealed within community, and also empowers that community.

As you all must know by now, I am ALL about community! So, this is all good, right? It’s clear and wonderful and we can high five or hug each other and head to coffee hour!

Well, I’m not so sure.

Does the Spirit’s connection to community mean that those who aren’t part of a community are denied access to the Spirit? What if they didn’t choose that status, but instead, were forced into isolation by a mental illness, or a failing body,

or a prison cell? And, does the Spirit come to every community, or just certain kinds of community? And, how do we know it’s really the Spirit creating community and uniting it? Certainly we’ve seen examples of communities who felt they were following the Spirit but wrought much pain and harm. Some folks are wary of Spirit-filled churches, having come to associate them with a proclamation of certainty that feels exclusionary or dangerous.

But, what our readings have taught me about the Spirit as I have sat with them this week, is that the Spirit is not just about community, but about community that questions! Like the questions I just asked—just thinking about the Spirit raises qustions!

Indeed, in each of our texts, the Spirit’s presence brings with it not a self-righteous sense of certainty, but, instead, a host of questions.

In our reading from the Prophet Ezekiel, it is God who questions. The Spirit brings Ezekiel into God’s presence, and the first thing that happens is that God asks him, “Mortal, can these bones live?”

After the cacophony of different languages in our Acts reading, we are told that those who were able to hear in their own language were amazed, but also perplexed, turning to one another and questioning each other “What does this mean?”

Immediately following Jesus’ baptism by John and the Spirit descending as a dove, Jesus is led out into the wildnerness by the Spirit, and his foundational identity as the Son of God is questioned by the devil.

And in our Gospel passage, where the Spirit has not yet come, Jesus laments that the disciples do NOT question—“Yet, No one asks me where I am going,” he says. The Spirit, *I* infer, when it does come with its truth-telling, is going to call much into question.

Although the Spirit as Advocate in our Gospel passage is often translated instead as Comforter, that’s not what I’m getting from our readings, at least as I hear them in our context, this day. I’m getting the Spirit as one who calls us to such bold and challenging community-building, that questioning is essential to its creation and maintenance.

Many, many newcomers who worship with us tell me how Spirit-filled this community is. And I agree! Before my wrestling with these texts, I would have said that is evidenced in the joy that makes such a wonderful home here, and the warmth with which we welcome each other each week, and the many ways in which we care for each other and the world. But today, I think the evidence that this community is so very alive in the Spirit is the courageous questioning it allows the Spirit to move it to.

I think of the deep questioning that we have taken on as a community in the past few years relating to race and racism. Many of us who are white have come to question that whiteness—to interrogate how it operates within each of us invidually, and in our institutional systems—to question whether we are seeing it clearly and fully. To wonder what we can do to address the inequalities and injustices it perpetuates.

I know this community is alive in the Spirit when I witness all of the questioning that we enable the Spirit to bring about within the context of our mission endeavors…

Of our Haiti team questioning what enables the most transformative ministry--how to balance the reality that relationship-building and physically working alongside each other, which necessitates plane tickets and hotel bills, is important and useful, with the reality that the donation of that same money directly to the institutions we partner with is also important and useful…

Of the ASP participants, preparing for their trip by participating in exercises that call into question our country’s distribution of resources, and interrogate their own stereotypes of communities living in poverty.

I know this community is alive in the Spirit when parents come together and question the intensity of the pace that is childhood in this place and time, or what it means to parent faithfully—“full of our faith.”

I know this community is alive in the Spirit when those who have lost a spouse come together and ask the question, “how do we go on?”

I know this community is alive in *the Spirit—the dove, the breath of God, the Advocate, the truth-teller--*not because of the certainties we profess—even the certainty that God is love--but because of the questions we courageously pursue.

So, I wonder, what questions has the Spirit asked in us, in you, that haven’t yet been asked aloud?

Today is the day of Pentecost! May we all be amazed and perplexed, and *ask one another*, “What does this mean?”

AMEN.