

Sermon for the Festival of Pentecost May 11, 2008

...Rev. Charles R. Exley

My wife wants a windmill. She wants a windmill in the backyard or on the roof of the house that would generate electricity from wind power. Well... even though today is Mother's Day I suspect there is a pretty good chance she won't get a windmill. But... I was reminded of our conversations about windmills as I accidentally ran across an article about a whole new kind of windmill for generating electrical power. It's all because you have to deal with the issue of wind when you're studying for Pentecost. That's how I came across the article in the first place. This particular article appeared less than a year ago in a magazine called "The Economist." The thesis of the article is the fact that the best winds don't occur at ground level. To get the most benefit, you have to go higher where the winds are stronger. We all know that, but how could we capture those higher winds that would provide up to a hundred times more energy?

Well, according to the article, one company has developed a windmill that works like a kite. Actually, it looks like a cross between a kite and a helicopter. Picture an H-shaped frame with rotors at the ends of the four points. Then, the whole thing is tethered to the ground by a long cable. The rotors lift the frame as they also turn dynamos that generate electricity. The electricity is then transmitted to the ground through aluminum cables. And... when the wind stops blowing, the dynamos are used in reverse as electric motors to keep the generator in the air. But, as you might have guessed, there is also a theological side to this idea – that's the part that originally interested me. Consider this as an important issue for Pentecost: if you want to catch the wind, you have to put yourself where the wind is blowing.

That's what happened to the Apostles as they came together on Pentecost in our text as recorded in the book of Acts. Jesus had told them to wait and the Spirit would encounter them, but I honestly don't think they had a clue about what to expect. All they did was show up at the Pentecost celebration. But, everybody showed up at the Pentecost celebration. It had been going on for generations. Fifty days after Passover, everyone came to the city to celebrate *Shavuot*, the Feast of Weeks, a day-long harvest festival. There was a huge crowd – no doubt the very reason God chose this particular day to change the meaning of Pentecost forever. From now on Pentecost would be about wind. Like Luke recalls in Acts, it would feel like "the rush of a violent wind."

We have learned to think of Pentecost as a primary occasion to remember the gifts and the work of the Holy Spirit. And, indeed, all our texts point us in that direction... recounting the many gifts that the Spirit provides. What we forget is that it took a while for the Spirit and the wind to be connected in peoples' thinking. The Greek words that we translate as Holy Spirit are *hagios* – "holy," and *pneuma* – "wind" or "breath," because breath is, in fact, a gentle wind. To look at this as those gathered that day would have done, is to recognize a Holy Wind. And, what could be a more collective thought than the wind? The wind blows on every one in every place. That would be the first thing they saw; the first thing they realized about the powerful events of this remarkable day.

But, yes, there would also be those tongues – like tongues of fire. They were not tongues of fire, but they were like tongues of fire, and they landed on every one of Jesus’ most significant followers. That very sight took this powerful collective experience and personalized it for some. Those who began to watch had no idea of what all this meant – until they realized that something unbelievable was taking place. All those who had been touched began to tell of the experience in the native language of everyone who had gathered. People had gathered from everywhere in the known world, as far as these people knew. Now, all of a sudden, they heard this small group speaking in their own historical tongues... “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..., not to mention Cretans and Arabs.” Everybody... it was nothing short of remarkable.

"Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" someone said. They knew they were Galileans – it was the accent. They spoke the languages of the crowd, but you could tell they were not native speakers. It was clearly something that came from Galilee – from Galileans – that was being given to and shared with everyone else. It was the wind. The wind blows on everyone – no exceptions. Sometime later they would come to understand that the love of God is like the wind... sent to every one in every place. God’s love is everywhere the wind blows. No exceptions.

But not everyone in the crowd was interested in the xenolalia taking place that day. It was not *glossalalia* – speaking in tongues; ecstatic speech. It was *xenolalia* – speaking in many different languages. But, just as you would not necessarily want to listen to someone from a rival community spouting off in ways that you had never seen or heard before, so was the case for these people on that Pentecost day. There were the ever-present cynics among them who shouted, “They are filled with new wine.” They’re drunk. Shut them up. But, even though Lutheran college students have had great fun with the text, printing t-shirts that say, “Acts 2:15,” “...these are not drunk, as you suppose, it is only nine o’clock in the morning,” Peter was not joking at all when he jumped to his feet and began shouting. Listen to what I am saying to you, this is about that which was prophesied by the prophet Joel.

This is about God declaring, “...I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh...” This is about the wind that blows on everyone. This is about the breath of God that blows on everyone too. And, everyone means everyone – women, children, slaves, everyone. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” God’s love is for everyone. First it was given to the Jews to share with the world. Then, Jesus, God’s own son, spoke of this love. You killed him, but even that would not stop the love which is more powerful than the winds or the seas. Even with death you could not stop him and the all-encompassing power of that love.

Well, that’s about the place where we came in: wind that changed something old into something new. Wind that touched everyone with not only the presence of nature but the presence of a loving God. Wind that blows us toward each other with courage and clarity. Wind that taught us how to talk to each other in the words of personal context: looking into your language and your place, your history and your traditions. The wind of God and the breath of God. That is Holy Spirit; a Holy Spirit that touches everyone with a connection to each other that defines us through each other.

It's very much like an old barnyard story I particularly love. It tells of a mouse who looked through a crack in the wall to see the farmer and his wife opening a package. "Mmmm, what food might be in there?" the mouse thought to himself. But, instead, he was devastated to watch them unwrap a mousetrap! "Oh dear!" he began to cry. "There's a mousetrap in the house!"

The mouse ran out of the house shouting his terrifying news to the entire barnyard. The chicken clucked and scratched, raised her head and said, "Mr. Mouse, I can tell this is a grave concern to you, but it is of no consequence to me. I cannot be bothered by it." The mouse then told the pig, "There's a mousetrap in the house!" The pig sympathized, but said, "I am so very sorry, Mr. Mouse, but there is nothing I can do about it but pray. Be assured you are in my prayers." So, the mouse turned to the cow and shouted, "There's a mousetrap in the house!" "Wow, Mr. Mouse, I'm sorry for you, but it's no skin off my nose," said the cow.

So, the mouse, thoroughly dejected, turned toward the house to face the mousetrap alone. But... that very night there was a sound heard in the house – the sound of a mousetrap catching its prey. The farmer's wife rushed to see what she had caught. In the darkness she did not see that it was a venomous snake caught by its tail. As she bent down to look, the snake bit the farmer's wife. The farmer rushed her to the hospital but she was terribly ill. He took her home, hoping she would recover.

Everyone knows you treat fever with fresh chicken soup, so the farmer took his hatchet to the barnyard for the soup's main ingredient. But his wife continued in her sickness. So, friends and neighbors came to sit with her day and night. To feed them, the farmer butchered the pig. Yet, the farmer's wife did not get well; she died. So many people came for her funeral that the farmer had to slaughter the cow to provide food for all to eat. The mouse looked upon it all from his crack in the wall with great sadness.

But God sent the wind – the breath – to touch the entire barnyard... a wind that will never stop blowing. If only they had felt and heard the mighty power of this holy wind.