

Edina Morningside Community Church  
United Church of Christ  
Sunday, May 24, 2015  
Rev. Howard K. Bell  
*Filled With the Spirit*

The first year that I worked as the Founding Executive Director of Pathways, I was privileged to travel to several cities in the United States to attend conferences. Most of these cities were nice places to visit such as Los Angeles, CA and Miami, FL. I learned from many of the national experts in healing approaches that were intended to be complementary to medicine not alternative. At some point in the year, I teased the Board of Directors that I had a life-long desire to travel to Hawaii; had never been there; and perhaps they could find a conference in Hawaii for me to attend. At the summer Board picnic, I was presented a t-shirt printed with these words: "There must be a conference in Hawaii that I can attend". By September, I received a flyer in the mail announcing a fantastic conference in Maui, HI, sponsored by the Academy of Guided Imagery. The conference included a lineup of the top experts in this newly emerging field. Guided Imagery is a powerful tool both for psychologists and for the clinicians involve in holistic healing. By December I was spending a week attending one of the best conferences I had ever attended which also included significant time off to enjoy the beaches and explore this beautiful tropical island.

I say this with a little bit of a tongue-in-cheek, but I share this story as a personal example of a time when I felt "filled with the spirit". I remember my awe when the flyer arrived in the mail. I initially questioned whether it could possibly be real, or whether my Board would take seriously a request for me to travel to Hawaii; or whether it was truly justified for professional expense. All those questions were answered positively. The information I learned at this conference informed much of my work during my 20-year career at Pathways.

No, I did not actually believe that God or the Holy Spirit had a hand in sending me that conference flyer, but I do believe in and enjoy being open to possibilities of synchronicity. I also believe in and enjoy being open to the possibilities of God's hand being at work in synchronistic and mysterious ways in our world, in the life of this faith community and in all of our individual lives. I also shared this story because I am inviting you, today, to practice guided imagery.

See if you can imagine being an early follower of Jesus on that Shavout day. Shavuot refers to the Jewish festival marking the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, which occurs seven weeks after Passover. It is on that Shavout festival day that the events described in today's text occurred. Since that day, Christians have always celebrated Pentecost Sunday.

UCC Biblical commentator, Kate Matthews (Huey) speaks of the power of Pentecost in these words:

*“Fire, wind, and humble Galileans speaking persuasively in many tongues were dramatic signs that God was doing a new thing that would transform the lives of all those present, and far beyond, in time and place.”<sup>1</sup>*

Hear again some of these powerful Pentecost images: *“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. (Acts 2: 4)* Violent wind. Remember the last violent windstorm that you experienced. Can you remember both what it sounded like and how it felt? Did it make you feel calm or fearful? Were you exposed to the wind or just inside your car or inside your house? In our text we are told that the rush of the violent wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. That sounds almost like a tornado ripping the roof of your home off and leaving you sitting there hearing and feeling the rush of the violent wind. Clearly what the followers of Jesus experienced that day was dramatic.

Next we hear these words: *Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. (Acts 2: 5)* If you attended Morningside After Dark on April 27 you heard Amy Salloway give a dramatic reason of a time when her hair caught on fire during a stage performance. Well, our text does not say that anyone had their hair caught on fire, but the image could be similar since the text says a tongue of fire rested on each of them. I imagine that this experience would have been startling to say the least. Terrifying might another way to describe a tongue of fire resting on you.

*All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” (Acts 2: 6)* Kate Matthews (Huey) gives these words of interpretation, *“Here, at the dawn of a new era, on the birthday of a church called to spread to the ends of the earth, the display is for all. Not only the disciples, gathered in a room, getting themselves together after Jesus is once again departed. Not only the holiest or the most faithful or the most learned, not only the believers, not only those who were with Jesus on the road or witnesses to his Resurrection. No, in this case, at this moment, “all flesh,” male and female, old and young, slave and free, are invited and included. And just to make sure that they know they’re all included, the formidable obstacle of a multitude of languages is overcome....”<sup>2</sup>*

When, and what experiences, have you had that made you feel as though you were filled with the Spirit? Not all experiences of being filled with the spirit needs to be as dramatic as Pentecost or even my dream. I believe you can have life-transforming experiences in far simpler and less dramatic ways – such as times of worship, hearing an inspirational text or sermon, in singing, in hearing music, in prayer, in meditation, and certainly, in silence, as those who participate in our Taize services could attest. They may also occur in normal activities of daily life and certainly not always associated with religious activities. Many of us may feel filled with the Spirit when we are out in nature – in God’s creation. Or when we observe the wonders of God’s creation such as the Grand Canyon, or the waterfalls of Maui, Niagra Falls or even Minnehaha Creek. I was filled with the spirit once when I visited the

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<sup>1</sup> [www.ucc.org/weekly-seeds](http://www.ucc.org/weekly-seeds)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

Mayan ruins in Tikal, Guatemala. I imagined that I was actually transported back in time to when the ruins were filled with the daily activities of the indigenous Mayan people. I felt a powerful spiritual energy on that day.

As we explored in our imaginations around Pentecost, spiritual times may also be times of experiencing fear, or pain or uncertainty or even loss. What about the experience of giving birth to a child? What of that empty nest syndrome when children leave home and parents are left to find new meaning and purpose in life? What of having a life-threatening challenge and surviving? What of overcoming trauma? What of even falling into love or falling out of love and having to explore separation and divorce? What of the death of parent or other loved one?

Each of these experiences may be times of being spirit-filled or spirit-drained. One essential element of being filled with the Spirit, I believe, is that we are open.

The determination as to whether certain events are spirit-filled or spirit-draining, is based on our faith journey, based on our readiness, based on our openness to God's Spirit. On that first Pentecost, I believe the disciples and other followers of Jesus were faithful, ready and open to the coming of the Spirit. Their interpretations of those events resulted in their ecstatic expressions that brought 3,000 people into their faith community.

And what about us today? What events are occurring in your life where God's spirit might pour out upon you? It is essential that, as a community, we are open to hearing from and caring for one another during times when our lives are disturbed; during times when we feel spirit-drained, during times when we need community in order to be open to God's spirit. Biblical commentator, David M. Bender, says: *God's spirit weaves together the generations through a Spirit that brings life out of death, hope out of despair... we celebrate our glimpses of the work of that Spirit, and we await again blowings of that fresh and life-giving Spirit.*<sup>3</sup> I believe that the blowings of life-giving Spirit can be visited upon us by our prayers – prayers for ourselves, prayers for one another, prayers for the community and prayers for the world in need.

What about this faith community and this Interim Time? Use the power of Guided Imagery to imagine the future God desires for this community. What events are occurring where God's spirit might pour out upon this faith community? How might we glimpse the work of that Spirit as we proceed into an uncertain time? How can the life of this faith community be transformed and spirit-filled? I believe that each moment holds open the possibility of being spirit-filled.

Together, we will have an opportunity during this interim time, to review our history – both the best of times and the worst of times. Together, we will have an opportunity to review the time, energy and financial commitments we wish to make to the work and ministries of this church. Together we will have the opportunity to re-engage if we have fallen away or become discouraged about the future. Together we will have the

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<sup>3</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).

opportunity to transform the way in which we govern ourselves. Together we will prepare for a future with a new settled pastor. Yes, there is much work to be done, but there is also transforming and spirit-filled opportunities each step of the way on this interim journey. May this day of Pentecost connect us to the past and give us hope for the future filled with the Spirit. Amen.