I’d like to ask you all to take a deep breath with me. Breathe in. Breathe out. Once more. Breathe in. Exhale. Now, don’t you feel better? That’s what I do right before each time I get up to preach. The simple act of breathing can be a prayer, especially when it’s intentional and when it’s a way of welcoming God’s breath of life into your body.

Today is the day we celebrate the gift of the Holy Breath. That’s what the Holy Spirit is, the breath of God. In the Bible, breath and spirit are the same word, pneuma. It’s where we get the powerful word pneumatic from as well as the breathless word pneumonia. The Holy Spirit is the breath of God, and like the air that we breathe, we’re often oblivious to the presence of God’s Spirit until we find that we are gasping for breath. Pentecost reminds us to take a deep breath of God’s Spirit and fill our lungs with God’s life that’s blowing in the world.

It has already been 7 weeks since Easter. The Acts of the Apostles says that after Easter Jesus leaves behind just 120 followers. That’s it. Numerically speaking, Jesus wasn’t much of a success; he was no Joel Osteen. And those 120 followers were a ragtag bunch. They were people who had been fishermen, some tax collectors, terrorists, prostitutes, demon-possessed, and then, of course, there was his mother. That’s the sort of motley crew that Jesus entrusts to tell his story to the world and to carry on his ministry of life. Jesus had faith in them. Jesus has faith in us. It’s amazing what we can accomplish when someone believes in us.

On the day of Pentecost, those 120 eclectic followers of Jesus are waiting for what’s next. They’d seen Jesus die. They’d seen him live again. And the last thing he tells them before he leaves them is, “Stay here, guys. Don’t go anywhere yet. Wait. Wait for the Holy Spirit. The breath of God will give you the power you need to tell my story.” And on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit arrives on the scene with the rush of a mighty wind and the power of a pneumatic drill, and that motley crew is filled to the gills with the breath of God and they begin to speak in other tongues. Pentecost is a wild and crazy day.

That wild experience of the Spirit is what that we usually associate with Pentecost. There are some Christians who call themselves Pentecostals after this story – I even know some Pentecostal UCCers, seven a few at St. Pauls. Pentecostals believe that the experiences of the day of Pentecost still happens today: a spectacular filling of the Holy Spirit followed by speaking with other tongues.

I did not grow up Pentecostal. We were taught that the Holy Spirit stopped giving the gift of tongues when the last book of the New Testament was written. Ours was a faith of the head.
Forget ecstatic spiritual experiences, what you needed was to have your doctrine right. And unlike Confirmation at St. Pauls, you could leave your questions at the door.

But that focus on doctrine left me feeling dry. It didn’t feel complete. Something was missing. I wanted spirituality. I wanted an experience of God that I could feel. When I was about the age of our young people being confirmed today, my family moved to a small town in southern Oregon. Down the street from our house was a Christian bookstore that I would pass on my way to school. I stopped in occasionally to check out the new records by Christian Rock groups with names like Stryper, Petra and Resurrection Band. The owner of the shop was a Pentecostal. He asked me whether I had ever received the gift of tongues. I said, “No, the gift of tongues ceased when the last book of the New Testament was written.” He said, “No, the Holy Spirit still does give the gift of tongues. I know because I have it.” There was a group of young people who met in the back room of his shop for a sort of youth group on Friday nights, and he invited me to join them.

I was new in town, and at our church I was the youth group, so I decided to check it out. I had learned the story of Pentecost in Sunday School. And if it could happen in an upper room in Jerusalem, then maybe it could happen in a back room in Oregon. I didn’t tell my parents I was going. They would not have approved of my dabbling in tongues-speaking. You never know where speaking in tongues might lead.

The group was a gathering of wholesome, quirky kids. They were the sort of kids that you might imagine would spend Friday night in the back room of a Christian bookstore instead of at a party. I fit right in. They played guitars and sang songs, and as they got more and more into the music, hands went up, praising Jesus, and then sounds began to come out of their mouths that sounded like “kuuuraba sundiggadiggaditty.” The owner of the bookstore came over to me and asked, “Jeff, would you like to receive the baptism of the Holy Ghost and the gift of tongues?” And I said, “Sure.” He said, “Just let your tongue become loose and start to speak whatever sounds come out.” Then he laid his hands on my head and prayed, “Oh, Lord, send your gift of the Holy Spirit upon my brother! Let him speak in other tongues as the Spirit gives him utterance!” The other kids were still speaking in tongues around me, some cried out, “Yes, Jesus!” I thought I heard the sound of a mighty, rushing wind. I opened my mouth, waiting for the Spirit to descend with the gift of tongues, and this is what came out: “Uhhhh….”

That was my experience of speaking in tongues. It didn’t take. I never went back to that group. They were nice enough, but it was an experience that was not authentic to me. The Holy Spirit might very well still give the gift of tongues to some people. There are many mysteries in the world, and we who are of a more rational faith could use some more mystery and some tongues-speakers in our midst. But I applied myself to learning a different sort of tongue. I took French.
I found that although the Holy Spirit had not given me the gift of tongues, God had given me a love for learning languages, and learning and working with language has brought me more joy in life than anything else. Eventually God would use that love to help me preach.

That, I believe, is how the Holy Spirit usually works. You don’t have to go out looking for more exotic and novel experiences to be spiritual. The Spirit is as close to you as your breath, every day. What gives you life? What helps you to breath? What restores your soul? That’s the Spirit at work within you, and the Spirit works in us in ways that are as diverse as we all are. The loves and interests and passions that you have, that wonders that make you uniquely who you are, those are gifts from God.

But for Christians, spirituality is never simply private. Spirituality begins within us, but it always moves us outward. God gives us gifts to restore our souls, so that we can use God’s gifts to restore our world. That’s what Pentecost is about. If you follow the flow of the 2nd chapter of Acts, the day of Pentecost begins with a spiritual experience among the disciples, but it ends with a new community of life.

On Pentecost, Peter stands up and preaches his first sermon. He has come a long way in 7 weeks. Just 7 weeks ago on Good Friday we heard him deny that he ever knew Jesus – three times. But here he is standing up in front of the very crowd that called out for Jesus’ death and he is inviting that crown into that community of life.

The church goes from 120 to 3120 members in a single day

That’s how the Pentecost ends. The Spirit forms a community called the church, a community that is called to look like Jesus. We don’t always live up to that call, but the description of the first church at Pentecost is always our goal. It’s the goal of St. Pauls Church: to be a community of healing, of forgiveness, of radical sharing and hospitality, a community that puts life back into those from whom it’s been taken. The meaning of Pentecost isn’t found in the rushing wind of the Spirit or the wild tongues of fire, but in the new community that’s given birth by the Spirit. For Christians, spirituality is never an end in itself. It renews us, but it inevitably leads us to be people who are used by God to renew our world.

Two Sundays ago the nine young people who are being confirmed today presented their confirmation projects. Modeled on Jesus’ parable of the talents, each of them was given $20 and asked to put it to good work. The presentations were fantastic, and St. Pauls is blessed to have them in our church. They are a breath of fresh air for us. And what impressed me was how each of them used something that they loved, something that inspired them, to improve the lives of others.

Orianna and Natalie and Nick each love animals, and so their projects went to help abused and neglected pets. Margot and McKenzie love to read, and that love for reading inspired them to help with literacy programs. Maia loves to run, and she put her running to use in helping abused
and neglected children. Cal loves photography, and he used that love to make cards that he sold to help people with borderline personality disorder. Alexis loves to write, and she put her writing skill to use raising awareness about breast cancer. Annabel loves children and she put that love to work collecting toys for kids whose lives have been turned upside down because of their parents’ addictions.

That’s what it looks like when the Holy Spirit is at work. We may not speak in tongues at St. Pauls, but we are Pentecostals, because the Holy Spirit is at work within us. God uses our loves, God uses the things that give us life – running, photography, reading, kids, puppies – God’s Spirit inspires our loves to bring healing to broken places in our world.

That’s the call on all of our lives. So take another deep breath with me.

Acts 2 (excerpts) from the Common English Bible
When Pentecost Day arrived, the disciples were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak. There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. Some asked each other, “What does this mean?” Others jeered at them, saying, “They’re full of new wine!”

Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, “These people aren’t drunk, as you suspect; after all, it’s only nine o’clock in the morning! Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
Your young will see visions.
Your elders will dream dreams.
Even upon my servants, men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

“Fellow Israelites, listen to these words! Jesus of Nazareth was a man whose credentials God proved to you through miracles, wonders, and signs. You yourselves know this. In accordance with God’s plan, he was betrayed. You, with the help of wicked men, had Jesus killed by nailing him to a cross. God raised him up! God freed him from death’s dreadful grip, since it was impossible for death to hang on to him.

We are all witnesses to that fact. God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

When the crowd heard this, they were deeply troubled. They said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter replied, “Change your hearts and lives. Each of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you, your children, and for all who are far away—as many as the Lord our God invites.” With many other words he testified to them and encouraged them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.”

Those who accepted Peter’s message were baptized. God brought about three thousand people into the community on that day. The believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They
shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God’s goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.