

Catching Our Breath

A Sermon by Jeffrey P. Carlson

St. Pauls United Church of Christ

The Feast of Pentecost, 2009

Text: Acts 2:1-21 (at end of sermon)

I would like to read an excerpt from one of our official church documents that was produced in the past few months. You may not be familiar with it, but it contains important information about our life together as St. Pauls Church. The document is the newsletter of the St. Pauls Confirmation Class of 2009, and the article I'm quoting from was written by Max Davis and is entitled "Munchkins." I quote, "Inside of the confirmation room, munchkins bring our class together as well as produce a friendly atmosphere. They give us something to eat but most of all they bring our class into the religious mindset. Even though we all didn't go to the same school, and all aren't best friends, through the church, and through munchkins, we have been brought together by something as simple as small pieces of cake." Brought together by small pieces of cake. That sounds a lot like communion to me. Max is engaging in what theologians call practical theology. Practical theology looks at our beliefs about God that bubble up from within a congregation.

The Confirmation Newsletter is full of wonderful reflections in practical theology, written by each of our confirmands about their experiences over the past two years: doing outreach together, having fun together, learning about our faith as well as other faiths, performing together in Bible Story Theatre, and worshipping together with all of us. All of their experiences go into the history that we share together as St. Pauls Church, and become a part of the ongoing story of who we are.

Being a church means sharing a common story. Last Thursday we began a series of new member classes, and one thing that Avena asks us to do on our first night together is to go around and each one share something of his or her own faith journey and how we got to St. Pauls. And it's remarkable to hear all of the different places that we've come from to form this congregation. In the latest class there were Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic, Pentecostal, people with no church background, and even a couple of folks who actually grew up UCC, coming together to form this particular United Church of Christ. The religious diversity of this congregation is amazing. And God calls us, this diverse group of people, to be the church.

After we've said something about our personal faith journeys, I stand up and with limited success attempt to condense 500 years of UCC history into 15 minutes. And in another session, Tom will show his famous slide show, now a Power Point presentation, about the 166 year history of St. Pauls Church. How our ancestors decided that they needed to start a church because somebody died. How they went on to found Uhlich Children's Home

and St. Pauls House, and in later years helped get the Night Ministry and the Lincoln Park Shelter going. Those are all stories about different generations of St. Pauls Church taking risks to faithfully respond with the compassion Jesus to the new challenges that their world faced.

All of these streams flow together, all of these different stories converge, to make us who we are as a congregation. When God calls us to be the church, we become a part of a story that began before we were born and that will keep on going long after we've died. We're part of something greater than ourselves, and that's an exciting thing to know. It gives meaning to our lives. It's good to pause and take time to reflect and catch our breath, to remember the stories of where we've come from.

Our culture tends to make us into people who live without a story and without memory, especially as Americans. We are people who are obsessed with what's new and what's now, as if that's all that matters in life. We move around so much that it's difficult to put down any roots, and our busyness leaves us breathless. Why are we always so busy? But as Christians, we learn to live as people who are formed by rich and deep memories, stories that help us live fuller and more faithful lives in the present.

The thread that holds all of those different stories together, the thread that links all of us into an ongoing story of faith, is the presence of God's Spirit. The wind of the Spirit has been blowing in the church far longer than 166 or 500 years. The day of Pentecost is when the church breathed its first breath of life, and we find that story in the book of Acts.

After Easter, Jesus left behind a church with just 120 members. That's it; after 3 years of ministry you'd think that the Son of God could have done better than that, wouldn't you? Jesus didn't plant a mega-church, just a congregation of 10 dozen people who were uneducated, unsophisticated folks, mostly peasants and fisherman. But Jesus tells his disciples: *you* will receive power to carry on my work, and you will keep telling my story.

And on Pentecost the Spirit comes with the power of a mighty, rushing wind, like Kevin pulling out all of the stops of the Aeolian-Skinner organ, the very Spirit of Christ comes within them and among them. If you read to the end of the 2nd Chapter of Acts, you would find that by the end of the day of Pentecost, the church had gone from 120 members to 3,120. A new member class of 3,000 people in a single day.

But by the time Luke wrote the book of Acts, those early days were just a distant memory. A couple of generations had passed. Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans, the first Christians had been scattered throughout the Roman Empire. They were under a great deal of stress. Peter, who preached his first sermon on Pentecost, ended up in Rome where like Jesus he was crucified - upside down - and Paul had been

martyred in Rome as well. The going was tough, and so Luke wrote Acts to remind his contemporaries where they'd come from, what their mission was all about, and to give them hope to keep carrying on. You've to know where you've come from to know where you're going.

It's important to hold on to your memories of how God has been faithful to you in the past. It's important to hold on to your memories of how God has seen you through life, because those memories give us strength. When we forget where we've come from, we can end up being paralyzed by fear in the present. We can close in upon ourselves. Or we can find that we're doing things that don't really matter, spending our time and energy in ways that no longer have anything to do with the kind of lives we've been called to live.

There's a story about a little girl who sees her mother cutting the wings off a chicken she is about to roast. When the little girl asks why, the mother says, "Because that's the way my momma always did it." So, the girl asks her grandmother, who answers, "Because that's the way *my* momma always did it." Finally, the girl asks her great-grandmother, who says, "Because my pan was too small."ⁱ

They forgot their story.

Today we commission a new generation of St. Pauls to go on a mission trip to Appalachia. Going on a mission trip is one of the main themes of the book of Acts. The Spirit of God keeps pushing the church out on mission trips, outside our comfort zones, saying: go talk to people who don't look like you. Go talk to people who don't live like you or talk like you.

The miracle that occurs on Pentecost is the gift of tongues. The Spirit enables those 120 uneducated Galileans to speak in other languages. There are people from all over the world gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost. And they hear the disciples speaking their own languages. The Spirit gives the disciples the gift of speaking somebody else's tongue. That's how the Spirit is. Just like the wind, God's Spirit pays no attention to our national borders or ethnic divisions. The Spirit blows right over our borders. The Spirit is multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-lingual.

If we want to keep up with the Spirit, then the church always has to keep on the move, because like the wind, the Spirit never sits still. And when we follow the Spirit, we find that God transforms our own lives just by taking the risk of going.

Logan Frank, in his confirmation article, writes about going on the Crop Walk to raise money to feed the hungry, and he says, "The Crop Walk changes lives of many people and it changed my life too. This experience gave me confidence to go out and do what's right." Peter Contos, writing about cooking dinner at the Lincoln Park Community

Shelter says, “Even though we were at the shelter to feed people, I was the one who walked away full.” Walking away full. That’s what happens when we follow the Spirit. God surprises us with more than we ever imagined.

Peter the Apostle stands up to preach his very first sermon on the Day of Pentecost. The last time we saw Peter around here was five weeks ago on Good Friday. He was sitting by a fire in a courtyard, warming himself, while Jesus was inside under arrest. Denial follows denial as Peter tries to save his own chicken skin. “I don’t know him. No, you’ve mistaken me with someone else. I never knew the man!” The cock crows, and Peter slinks away into the night weeping bitterly, a miserable failure of a disciple.

But the Spirit of Jesus breathes new life into Peter. The Spirit of Jesus breathes new life, giving Peter the courage to stand up in broad daylight, in front of an international crowd, and this uneducated fisherman preaches his very first sermon and says, “Yes, I really did know Jesus, and this is how it all happened...”

The good news of the story of Pentecost is that God’s Spirit keeps on breathing new life into disciples like us, people who are often frightened failures, bent on saving our own skins. The Spirit keeps breathing new life into us again and again. Peter tells the crowd that that’s what it means to be the church. “God declares, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. Your young people - your sons and your daughters - shall prophecy; your young adults shall see visions and your senior citizens shall dream dreams.’” What visions do you see? What dreams do you dream? Take a deep breath of God’s Spirit; take a deep breath, because the story that we will tell as the church is found in the dreams and the visions that God has promised to give to every one of you.

¹ Samuel G. Freedman, *Upon This Rock: the Miracles of a Black Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) p. 96.

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 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, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’