

**Sermon - 5/20/18**  
**“The Spirit - She Is an Artist”**  
**Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21**  
**Day of Pentecost**  
**Davidson College Presbyterian Church - Davidson, NC**  
**Scott Kenefake**

To begin this morning, I’d like you to imagine that you are on vacation—holiday--in Washington, D.C.—more specifically, you’re in the nearby town of Alexandria—and you notice many people walking around the “*Old Town*” neighborhood, ..., even on a lovely Sunday morning. They are all heading toward King Street, Alexandria’s major downtown road. Groups of friends, couples, and families with strollers. It’s a beautiful day, and you decide to follow the crowd.

Nearing the main street, you realize that it was *Art Walk*, a yearly festival in Old Town. King Street is closed to traffic and turned into ten blocks of tented galleries. Painters, sculptors, furniture makers, jewelers, crafters, weavers— they are all there.

There are musicians, too, and food vendors, and nonprofit organizations and political candidates trying to woo donors and voters.

As you stand on a corner and look out on the scene, all your senses are alive, coaxed to full attentiveness by vibrant colors, bright chimes in the wind, the cool sound of a saxophone, the ... breeze carrying delectable evidence of a grill at work nearby.

And the street is full of people of all sorts: white, black, and brown; young and old, from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. Children are laughing and running up and down the street with balloons, gifts from a clown entertaining them at the opposite corner.

Neighbors greet one another. The curious engage the artists with queries about their crafts. Many people are coming in and out of the surrounding shops and restaurants, others sit in outdoor cafes sipping lattes. The energy, the creativity—how wonderful it is!

And as you take in this scene, you think of a story from the New Testament in which, during a street festival, *the Spirit of God descended* on a crowd of *magnificent diversity* (Acts 2:1-13).

When the Spirit came, the boundaries of language, nationality, and religion that had separated all those gathered dissolved, and a new community was created, one of *a unified humanity*. Peter, a friend of Jesus, astonished by what he saw that day, said that it was the fulfillment of an ancient prophesy, the drawing together of humankind as one in the Spirit. Peter recited the prophesy:

*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 old men shall dream dreams,  
 Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
 In those days I will pour out my Spirit (Acts 2:17-18)<sup>1</sup>*

[The implication is that God’s Spirit is *everywhere*—especially out on the streets! And *not* just in our designated *sacred spaces*.

Think of it this way: the second verse of the biblical book of Genesis reads:

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World, A Spiritual Revolution*, Harper One, New York, 2015, pp. 235, 236

*“The earth was a formless void and darkness  
covered the face of the deep,  
while a wind from God swept over the face  
of the waters.”*

This means (in ancient Hebrew thought) that the animating agent of creation was the *air*, in Hebrew *ruach*, a word signifying “wind,” “spirit,” or “breath.” At each stage of creation, God breathes *new life* into the world, the spirit *speaks* all things into being.

In fact, the beginning of Genesis reads like a poetic version (of what one theologian has called) the *Great Oxygenation Event*. God is literally the air upon which all early life depends. The breath of God creates a sacred environment, the *atmosphere* of existence.

Indeed, in the biblical traditions, God is identified as *spirit*. Hebrew names this *Ruach ha-Kodesh*, the spirit of YHWH, or the Spirit of the Lord.

This spirit is the sustaining force of the universe, the invisible presence necessary for all life, the breath of God at creation and through the words of the prophets.

This spirit is often understood as the *feminine* aspect of the biblical divinity, and the term *ruach* can be rendered as either male or female.

(But) ... the notion of God-as-spirit (really) comes to the fore in the Christian New Testament, where the Greek word *pneuma* is used almost **four hundred times** to describe a sacred wind, divine breath, or the holiness of life, imbuing the whole story of Jesus with spiritual urgency. [But there’s more ...].

*Pneuma* is personalized as *Holy Spirit*, an embodiment of God’s own life, represented most often as a dove (or other bird), (and) sometimes in the *female* form.

(And), in the book of Acts, a rush of wind gives birth to the church, the spiritual body intended to carry on Jesus’s work in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Jurgen Moltmann, the renowned German Reformed Theologian, (now in his 90’s)—who converted to Christianity while reading Reinhold Niebuhr’s, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, in a POW Camp in Kilmarnock, Scotland, toward the end of World War II, has written beautifully of the Holy Spirit as Feminine Spirit, in his famous *Social Doctrine of the Trinity*, in his wonderful book, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*:

*The Holy Spirit is not subjugated to the Son or the Father, because the Holy Spirit appears besides the Father as the Divine Mother of the Divine Family, such that the Father and the Holy Spirit (as Mother) exclude both Patriarchy and Matriarchy. Both the Father and the Mother are hence liberated, and they are liberated in the Son (Jesus Christ), such that the Son (Jesus Christ) also is not subjugated to the Father or Mother (Holy Spirit).*

*If the Trinity is a community, then what corresponds to it is the true human community of (all people). A certain de-patriarchalization of the picture of God results in a de-patriarchalization of the church too.<sup>3</sup>*

But, this *Spirit*—*ruach*, *pneuma* (wind, breath) is also described as *fire*—a metaphor that also picks up some important Hebrew storylines:

- God speaks to Moses from a bush that burns without being consumed (Exod. 3:1-6)

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 109, 110, 111

<sup>3</sup> Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*. Trans. Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993. 157-60.

- God is present with the Israelites in the wilderness as a pillar of fire (13:12)
- And God descends to Mt. Sinai in fire (19:18)

Then the emphasis turns to *language*. The crowd hears the disciples speaking in *many* languages. Note that this is *not* the unintelligible prayer language that Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 14, as one of the gifts of the Spirit—in some “*charismatic*” churches today praying in this way—or speaking in tongues is considered an indication that one has been filled with the Spirit.

Rather, Pentecost is the reversal of *Babel* (Genesis 11:1-9). In Hebrew, there is a wordplay between the word *Babel* and the word *confused*. In English, the word *babble* comes from this story. Babble is language we don’t understand.

The echoing of Babel in Luke’s story of Pentecost has a powerful metaphorical meaning. You see, what happened at Babel confused the world by dividing it into separate languages and countries, resulting in misunderstanding, rivalries, and conflict. *Pentecost (then) is the beginning of the reunification of humanity.*<sup>4</sup>

And, believe it or not, one of the primary ways that the Spirit continues to spur-on the reunification of humanity is through *art—even the modern, avant-garde stuff you may not like or understand!* (Remember that **imaginary** stroll through the Art Fair in Alexandria?).

For example, just as Pope Francis has catalyzed a worldwide **imaginal change** today, **Francis and Clare of Assisi** created a very different **imaginarium** for many people in their time. They showed us that Christianity could be joyful, simple, sweet, and beautiful. As St. Francis is often quoted as saying, “You must preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words.” This demands no “belief” or theology whatsoever, but only eyes wide open.

Even **art** shifted in response to the Franciscan movement—as we can see in the humanistic art of Giotto—eventually leading to the Renaissance where all things **human** could be honored and celebrated as good in themselves. St. Francis is hardly ever pictured with a book, like so many saints. Many paintings of Francis do not even include a halo. It is not necessary. His enlivened body is already the halo. Francis is usually shown dancing, in ecstasy, with animals, or with his arms raised; his hands were hardly ever folded in prayer, as was the stereotypical style.

In the great basilica in Assisi where Francis is buried, there is a wonderful bronze sculpture of Francis inviting the **Holy Spirit**. Instead of looking upward as is usual, he gazes reverently and longingly **downward—into the earth—where the Spirit is enmeshed**. Francis understood that the Holy Spirit had in fact **descended**; **she** is forever and first of all here! There are artists who inherently understand incarnation.

One person, symbol, or idea can set the course of history, and its meaning, in one direction instead of another. We recognize some individuals who “**turn**” history, art, music, and politics in new and unimagined ways, such as Francis of Assisi and, now, Pope Francis. Picasso (1881-1973) did this for painting, Martha Graham (1894-1991) and Michael Jackson (1958-2009) did the same for dance, and Albert Einstein (1879-1955) did it for physics and cosmology.<sup>5</sup>

Friends, art can amplify the sacred and challenge the status quo. The arts help us to hear above the cacophony and pause in the midst of our multitasking. The arts engage a sacred frequency that is perforated with pauses. Artists learned . . . that there were things too full for human tongues, too alive for articulation. You can dance and rhyme and sing it, you almost reach it in the high notes, but joy unspeakable is experience and sojourn, it is the ineffable within our reach.

When you least expect it, during the most mundane daily tasks, a shift of focus occurs. This shift bends us toward the universe, a cosmos of soul and spirit, bone and flesh, which constantly reaches toward divinity. Ecclesial

<sup>4</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power—And How They Can Be Restored*, Harper One, New York, 2011, pp. 185-186

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi* (Franciscan Media: 2014), xv, 45, 225, 251.

organizations want to control access to this milieu but cannot. The only divisions between the sacred and the secular are in the **minds** of those who believe in and reinforce the split . . .

All things draw from the **same** wellspring of spiritual energy.<sup>6</sup>

*That* is the Holy Spirit at work in our world. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, second edition (Fortress Press: 2017), 183-185.