

June 4, 2017
 Pentecost Sunday
 Psalms 104:24-25; 33-34
 Acts 2:1-9; 12-21 (pg 119)
 “Holy Spirit Holes”
 Michael Stanfield

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² 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. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ ‘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.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
 in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
 and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
 and signs on the earth below,
 blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
 and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ **This is the word of the Lord**

Today we once again celebrate the Day of Pentecost – that glorious day when the church received the mysterious and unpredictable gift of the Holy Spirit. Yet the irony is that we do it so nonchalantly, so rationally, so reasonably. It was not always so.

Take the church of 10th century medieval Europe for example. Christians of that era did not have the ‘benefit’ of the age of the enlightenment where reason and rationalism would come to rule every waking moment of their lives like it does ours. There was no such thing as the scientific method holding out the promise for them of penetrating all the mysteries of the universe as it has for us. In its place, they had the Cathedrals which they believed connected them with the deeper mysteries of the universe. These massive buildings acted as open bibles, with stained glass windows sculptures and art renderings that depicted the great stories of scripture. The cathedrals were viewed as places where the mystery of Christ’s saving death could be touched and tasted.

The cathedral was, in fact, the soul container of its village – It was charged with caring for all of the individual souls it served in its community. These were harsh times – simple survival was a full time occupation for most people. Religious faith was not a mere convenience or habit – it was the main support system in the lives of struggling, frightened, powerless men and women. The cathedral offered a source of comfort, beauty and security for all who entered her doors.

Harvard scholar Diana Eck, in her work entitled, *Encountering God*, reveals some surprising aspects of religion in the medieval church. In those days, the liturgical calendar did far more than determine what biblical texts were read each Sunday. The church calendar shaped the daily lives of the people. Festivals, saint’s days, holy days, all lived and breathed in the medieval church. It was the church’s job to see that the marking of these days remained the guiding force in daily life.

Professor Eck has discovered that Pentecost was one of the most unique and most creatively celebrated days on the church’s calendar. In 10th-century Rome, for example, the church really knew how to throw its own birthday party. In order to make the coming of the Holy Spirit a dramatic, dynamic, event for their congregations, the leaders of Pentecost services involved architecture, not just anthems.

The custom of painting heavenly scenes on the great domed and vaulted ceilings of cathedrals served not only to inspire. It also disguised some secret trap doors. These small holes were drilled through the ceiling to the rooftop. During the Pentecost worship service, servants would be drafted to clamber up on the roof. At the appropriate moment during the liturgy, they would release live doves through these holes. From out of the painted skies and clouds on the ceiling of the cathedral, swooping, diving, chaotic symbols of a vitally present Holy Spirit would descend on the people below.

At that moment, the choirboys would break into the whooshing and drumming sound of a holy windstorm. Finally, as the doves were flying and the winds were rushing, the ceiling holes would once again be used – as bushels and bushels of rose petals were showered down upon the congregation. These red, flickering bits of flowers symbolized tongues of flame falling upon all who waited below in faith.

They called these openings to the sky in medieval churches “Holy Spirit Holes.” Imagine the mystery, majesty and power such a service would bring into the hard-bitten lives of these

Christians. Imagine how close and involved each believer must have felt in receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. Can we imagine that same kind of Spirit-breathing, breathtaking power and vitality blowing down from the ceiling of this church today? I wonder – can the Holy Spirit get through our fire code crawl spaces and this steel reinforced ceiling?

I believe it can. But I also believe that even if we celebrated Pentecost in such a way it would still be much more difficult for us 21st century believers to experience the mystery and majesty of the Holy Spirit held in that symbol, than it was for those 10th century Christians.

The wonderful gifts of modern medicine, air buses, computers tablets and smartphones have all come with a price. And that price is a portion of our very souls. In order to have these things, it has meant that we have had to foster a rational point of view that is so one-sided that there is scarce room for mystery any more. And the problem with that is that at bottom, God's activity through the Holy Spirit is all mystery. And so, we are in dire need of some holes for the Holy Spirit – holes in the way we think, holes in our decidedly rational attitudes that give ample room for God to work in us and through us in a way that will blow our minds.

Rational knowledge of the outer world and even of God can be inspired by the Holy Spirit but rational thought alone on the subject finally misses the real mark.

Perhaps this is why we Presbyterians shy away from the Holy Spirit. We are all such reasonable Christians and the Holy Spirit is so – well – so un-reasonable. Some of our Reformed theologians have written volumes about the Holy Spirit that are all fine and good but my experience with a lot of that is that it finally just leaves me cold. It reminds me of a story told once about Mark Twain's encounter with a young reporter.

The reporter interviewing Twain asked him what caused things to be funny.

The noted humorist replied he did not know if it would be possible to give an exact answer to this question.

Not satisfied with this “non-answer,” the reporter asked a follow-up question. “Well shouldn't it be possible to break humor into small parts ... and to study the parts ... rather like dissecting a frog?”

Twain thought a few seconds and then said, “Yes, that may be possible. But remember, when you dissect a frog you can see the parts, but you no longer have the frog!!”

The Holy Spirit is like that – like something that we find hilarious. We can make room for it and celebrate its presence with joy and laughter but if we try and dissect its essence with too much reason we are left dead and lifeless...

Please hear me. I have nothing against being reasonable. I thank God every time I visit someone in the hospital for the gift and the miracle of modern medicine. I pride myself on being reasonable and being in a church with reasonable intelligent people. At the same time I cannot

help but come to the conclusion that we tend to treat God generally and the Holy Spirit specifically like a problem to be solved rather than a holy mystery to be experienced and lived.

Underneath it all, do we not find that we demand that God always be reasonable and in so doing have we not created for ourselves a spiritual vacuum that allows no breath of wind to blow, no flame of fire to ignite?

Maybe what we need to do is to open up some “Holy Spirit Holes,” in our thinking – in our approach to God – in our approach to God’s greatest gift which is his mysterious unpredictable living presence.

Do you trust the wind? Maybe that sounds like a strange question. But it’s no stranger than asking if you trust the Holy Spirit. Like the wind, the Spirit is unpredictable. It can surprise us and take us where we don’t want to go. It can drive us toward stillness, safety and shelter when we need it and into harm’s way when we have become complacent – but only if we are willing to cut some holes in the roof of our thinking and our attitudes to let that spirit wind pass through.

When I started out in college, I started out with the intention of going to medical school. So I took a lot of math and science my first two years. I must confess that I don’t remember much of what I learned. But I do remember a great quote that my physics teacher was fond of using. He’d say, “This is the sort of thing I wouldn’t believe, even if it really happened.”

God wants to make some holes in us in order to breathe into our lives some mind-bending winds – winds that some people simply might find hard to believe, “even if it really happens.”

Karl Barth was one of those theologians that wrote tomes about the Holy Spirit. I know because I was required to read them when I was seminary. At the time I thought it to be hubris of the highest order that a man would presume to write so much about the mind of God. What I didn’t know then was something that I only discovered much later. At the end of Barth’s life, he confessed to a recurring dream. In the dream, he saw himself arriving at the Pearly Gates pulling a child’s red wagon. As he looked in the wagon, he saw all of his writings which he had spent a life time creating all neatly stacked.

His interpretation of the dream at once revealed his deep humility. For, he said that what he got out of that was that all of his knowledge and all of his theologizing was but child’s play when compared to God’s greatness and grace. Hence one of the last things he wrote was “*finitum non capax infiniti*” which translated means “the finite cannot comprehend the infinite.”

Indeed. But while that may so, the infinite has entered into the finite with the coming of the Holy Spirit and we would have access to it in much larger measure if we were a bit more willing to let go of what we think is possible and do a lot more dreaming about the impossible. Tom Kinder is a pastor who writes a weekly column for his church’s web site. He recently wrote:

“The White Queen told Alice in Wonderland that she practiced believing six impossible things every morning before breakfast. This can be a dangerous practice. If we stretch ourselves to go

beyond the limits of our rational mind we risk entering the realm of madness. But that madness can be divine. Divine madness is what Plato called the inspiration of artists, and it is also a good name for the unconditional love and nonviolence and bold justice of Jesus Christ. It takes divine madness to challenge the powerful in Jefferson City and Washington DC and to stand with the poor and oppressed. It takes divine madness to love enemies and do good to them rather than hate and attack them. It takes divine madness to follow a crucified savior.”

Opening up holes for the Holy Spirit is not a rational act it is an act of divine madness...

It involves leaving the comfort of people that think like we do act like we do, worship like do. Opening up these holes can't be done by simply thinking everything through and planning well. It's a lot more messy than that. It happens by getting in touch with our imaginative side – by dreaming impossible dreams – like the dream of loving our mortal enemies rather than wanting to kill them, or the dream of befriending the poor, the messed up, the beaten up, the downtrodden.

You want to open a Holy Spirit Hole in your life and receive the Spirit in a powerful way? Ask God to help you be less than reasonable by helping you to realize any one of these impossible dreams.

Let us Pray. Gracious and most loving God we ask you to give us the courage to open up holes for your Holy Spirit in our lives so that the impossible is made possible, the unbelievable is made a living reality, freeing us to truly be your servant people through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen