

# ONE FACET OF A FRACTION

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on Pentecost Sunday, May 24, 2015

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **The Manifestation of the Spirit**

What you have just heard from the liturgist, Barb, who read with panache the difficult first 21 verses of the Book of Acts, the second chapter, is the classic story of what happened on the day of Pentecost.

These diverse people, a multitude assembled from all points of the then-known world, having gathered in Jerusalem and having conversed in their own languages, this vision was like a “tongue of fire” that hovered above each and every person. It was an extraordinary experience and one that, as Clare mentioned, is credited with the birth of the church.

And so things had been rather chaotic. Jesus had passed at this point and was no longer among them, at least in physical form, yet out of this confusion there arose a moment in time when the variegated crowds coalesced to start the church.

Some call the event “the manifestation of the Spirit.” Personally I prefer the word “manifestation” because to term it “the giving of the Spirit” implies that, prior to then, the Spirit wasn’t around, and now it’s being given. So something that wasn’t there is now there. This compares with the notion of manifestation, which implies that the people are becoming aware of a presence

that had always been around, and they’re increasingly aware of it and accessing its power.

## **Order out of Chaos at the Creation**

This is important because of the long Jewish/Hebrew history of the Spirit being present throughout their chronicles. The words “And the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters ” are in the very first paragraph of the Bible. Here is a poetic notion of our blue-marble planet emerging out of the chaos of the big bang. It is a way of saying, “Here is order coming out of chaos in the moment of creation.”

We have verses like Psalm 51, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me,” implying that our spirit can become occluded, can become soiled, can become stained, so put a new and right spirit within me. Clean me up, O God.

Ezekiel 37 sets forth this interplay in “The Valley of the Dry Bones,” and the hymn we just sang is “Wind Who Makes All Winds That Blow,” a play on the Hebrew word “ruach,” which means wind, breath, atmosphere, blowing, all of those different meanings. And so, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these

slain, that they may live,” that we read about in Ezekiel, using that same word.

### **Wind: An Excellent Metaphor for Spirit**

Wind is an extraordinarily good metaphor for the Spirit because it is both inside us when we take a breath as well as all about us as we live. The same metaphor transfers easily into the Greek, where we’ve got the word “pneuma.” The letters p-n-e-u, as in a pneumatic jackhammer or pneumonia, have to do with our lungs, have to do with breathing, but they also mean wind, spirit, blowing, as well as breath.

Or that passage in Zechariah. I put that one into the call to worship. “Then he [the angel] said to me, ‘This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.’ ” And in the context of the Book of Zechariah, it is political advice. It’s advice to somebody in charge of armies. “Don’t rely on your armies,” he’s saying. They won’t accomplish what he thinks they’re going to accomplish. “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts,” if you want to accomplish anything.

So these are some examples of the way in which the Spirit was understood at the time in which this event took place that gave birth to the church.

### **The Spirit of God as Exemplified In the Family of Our Church**

Okay. I’m going to switch gears now. In seminary classes, in Bible studies galore, you hear in preaching quite a bit about God, you hear a lot more about Jesus, and you hear a lot less about the Spirit.

So I want to give you some examples, but I’m going to do it in a different way. Eleven examples. I’ll go through them as rapidly as I can, but I’m going to do it in a way that you may not have heard before.

I’m going to start off talking about:

### **Bob and Elizabeth Neill.**

(Bob just rolled his eyes.) They are a deeply beloved couple in the church, and they have a particular gift – the gift of hospitality. It’s actually mentioned in the lists of spiritual gifts in the New Testament.

Among the many examples of their gift are the Soup Suppers that we have downstairs in the Fellowship Room during the Lenten season and the Hospitality Tent that we put up during parades, where we give away free popcorn and hot chocolate. Bob and Elizabeth are using their particular gift of hospitality to make sure that people have enough and that they feel welcome. They are acting in the best sense of host and hostess, the root sense of hospitality.

Now I want to ask you a question. I think they enjoy doing these kinds of things, and I know they’re good at it. So two things: They enjoy it, and they’re good at it. But are those the real reasons why they do it? What makes them act that way?

I’d like to propose an answer to that question. I don’t know for certain, but I’m guessing that they sense something deeper in the notion of fellowship within the church. Something a little deeper that is sacred to them. Getting people together, or welcoming a stranger. There’s a sacredness there, and this is therefore something that should

be done right and should be done well. They sense a holiness in the act of welcoming people.

All right, let's leave Bob and Elizabeth alone. I'm going to stop picking on them. I'm going to move over now to:

### **Catherine Cornelius.**

She has a particular love of animals. She is on the board of the Humane Society. She and her partner, or wife, Ethelyn, have taken in many different rescued animals over the years, but a number of them have passed away in the last couple years. So they're taking in some more.

They love dogs. Generally they like non-human species, as do the rest of us. They're good at it, but does this fully explain their behavior? I'd like to suggest to you that it does not. Instead, underneath it all, being a board member, taking care of animals, loving them, playing with them is, once again, that same sense of sacredness in the care of, love of, and respect for nonhuman species.

Watch Catherine's eyes narrow when you talk about the abuse of a dog, and you will see that this is a profound wrong in the world that must be righted. She senses a sacredness, a holiness in this facet of creation.

### **Carolyn Blake . . .**

. . . Is one of those who do the flowers for us nearly every Sunday. She is a florist by trade, retired now, but she spent many years as a florist and is able to do extraordinary things with flowers. She cannot be with us

this Sunday, which is one of the reasons I can get away with talking about her.

Carolyn enjoys her work; she is good at it. But does that fully explain the talent she brings to the task of organizing the flowers that we have on the communion table? Not today because we're having communion, but normally the Bible, the candles, the cross, and a beautiful bouquet serve as the focal points of our Sunday morning worship.

And I suggest to you that's a holiness that she senses, a sacredness in caring for the flowers we enjoy to beautify our communion table.

### **Tom Bucker . . .**

. . . Is also not with us today. He told me he was going to be away, and therefore I took the opportunity to put him on this list. But he is one of the ones in the same style as Bob and Elizabeth – those who greet people and see that they are well cared for.

Generally speaking, visitors to the church come in via the main doors, although as a rule the Old Guard come in through the doors next to the chancel. So if you're a visitor, Tom is one of the first people with a handshake, a smile, and a Bulletin to make sure that you feel comfortable.

We've got a motto that says, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here at First Congregational Church." He says it in a different, nonverbal way. He makes sure that everybody truly does feel welcome here. And then toward the end of the worship service, he passes out loaves of bread to those who are visitors.

Why does he do that? He's good at it; I think he enjoys it. But there's also a sense of sacredness in the act of making sure a visitor feels welcome to this church, that there is a holiness to it.

### **Suzanne Brigham . . .**

. . . Bakes the bread that Tom passes out to visitors. She also is not here, so I'm at liberty to tell you how good she is at baking bread. I think she enjoys it, at least I'm pretty sure she does.

And so nearly every Sunday, she brings three little loaves of bread that she has baked and hands them over to Tom in the narthex. There have even been Sundays when Suzanne has had to go on a family trip, yet she never fails to drop off the bread before leaving on a trip. It is important for her to see to it that Tom has it to pass out to visitors during the postlude of the worship service.

She's good at what she does; she enjoys it. And you see the theme here is that there's a sacredness to the act of baking that bread. There's a holiness to it.

### **Tim O'Neill,**

Over to my right, is a fireman. Not gung-ho enough to charge recklessly into burning buildings, risking life and limb, but competent and intelligent enough to live into his old age because of those qualities.

Now, why does he do that? He's good at it; he's paid to do it. In fact he has been promoted to high rank as a captain, Assistant Fire Marshall, because of his abilities. I think he enjoys it.

But also, in a subtle way, there is a sacredness to saving life, whether human or one of Catherine's dogs, or even to saving property. There is a sacredness, a holiness in what he does.

### **Clare Price,**

In front of me in a red shirt, is the owner of a local Roto Rooter franchise. Clare knows plumbing; he knows sewers. He knows these kinds of things, and he's able to fix almost anything. We know there are such people now and then among us. And he does it for the church nearly every time free of charge. He fixes virtually everything. All we have to do is call him.

I think he enjoys it; I know he is good at it. But there's something about the church, this specific congregation but also the Church Universal that is holy to him, that is sacred to him. And that's one of the reasons he does his work so well and does it with a smile on his face.

### **Barb Thompson . . .**

. . . Was our liturgist this morning, who read that difficult passage from Acts 2. Another facet about her is that she comes in every week to proofread the Sunday Bulletin. She's really good at it. When was the last time – show of hands – that you found a typo in the Bulletin? Okay, one hand. So she's not perfect.

Quality is what matters to Barb. She finds typos that have passed by me and Janet and Leslie. She's good at it, and I think she enjoys it. She's a nitpicker sometimes. She also proofreads the newsletter articles for "The Forecaster" that often come through

loaded with errors. Sometimes there's more red ink than black ink on those manuscripts.

Why does she do that? There's something holy about quality. There's something sacred about the product that we produce here as a church, and one of those things is that the Bulletin you're handed has some class, some beauty because of her.

### **Dan Reissig . . .**

. . . Is also a nitpicker, a badge of honor, in his view. He's also a lifelong editor of all things grammatical and syntactical.

Dan is the one who takes the raw transcripts of the pastors' sermons from the recorded discs, transcribes them to produce Word documents, cleans them up to reflect the fact that the spoken language and the printed language are two quite different forms of communication, and then puts them up on the internet where people can read and enjoy the sermons at their leisure.

Why does he do that? He's good at it; he enjoys it. But once again, taking the message of hope and love and goodness that sometimes proceeds from these pulpits and getting it out to a broader audience is one of the things that he does. It follows from a sense of the sacredness, a sense of the holiness of that act.

I'm nearly done. One more of those who bear a sense of holiness in their work is:

### **Janet Abel,**

The Associate Pastor of First Congregational Church. However, I'm not going to talk about her life here at the church,

wonderful though it is, but rather about her work as a chaplain at several of the local nursing homes.

She is dealing with end-of-life issues all the time. She does more funerals in a year than I will do in a lifetime. Janet is an expert on palliative care and is skillful in dealing with all of the different facets of the end of life and how to handle that inevitability with great understanding and compassion.

She is really good at it. I think she enjoys it. But once again, underneath it all, that does not fully explain why she does it the way she does. Instead, the endpoint of a human life bears a certain sacredness, a certain holiness in the passage.

### **Glimpsing the Holy Spirit**

All right. Bob and Elizabeth Neill, Catherine Cornelius, Carolyn Blake, Tom Bucker, Suzanne Brigham, Tim O'Neill, Clare Price, Barb Thompson, Dan Reissig, Janet Abel. Folks, I submit to you the Holy Spirit. Everything they have done has a holy, sacred component, motivated by the Spirit of God.

I look at these eleven different people, who compose one facet each of a fraction of the church. Eleven people among many others who together bring a sense of sacredness, of holiness to the work they do in the name of our church and for the good of all people. One facet of each of their lives. I submit to you eleven glimpses into what the Holy Spirit really is.

*Amen.*