

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."

Sermon:

This is an unassuming package of coffee. Just a brick, really. But it's a brick that has captured my attention this morning, or I suppose it's labeling has: "Vacuum-packed and sealed," it says. Coincidentally, it's also liturgical. Red for Pentecost! I hope this means we don't have to stick to decaf for Ordinary time!

These coffee grounds live in a vacuum. Inside the walls of this foil, it's fair to say that these coffee grounds have every available liberty. They can do anything they want, or nothing at all. These grounds could arm themselves with weaponry; they have autonomy over their bodies and body parts, or uh, bean parts. They can say, or smell, or stay frozen anyway they so choose. Because at the end of the day they are their own separate, impenetrable, completely disconnected entity. Inside this sealed package they can't so much as wiggle my coffee cups and saucers, even with their loudest protestations and most violent vibrations. The beloved community may very well exist right inside of here! But as long as there's a seal we will never know.

But...what if I used a pair of scissors, and I cut the seal of this package? I'm not going to do that by the way, because I wouldn't dare deprive my daughters of getting to hear that cool wooshing sound they love. If the seal is removed, the coffee grounds would no longer be separate. Their very presence would fill the room with a strong aroma within seconds. If they leaked out of the bag, I'd spend the rest of the hour vacuuming them out of the carpet fibers. And eventually, if I just left them alone, they would spoil.

There is a harvest in this bag. But its value cannot, will not be revealed in solitude, nor separation. The value of the harvest can only be revealed and experienced in community integration. These coffee grounds can be combined with steaming or dripping water, converted into a tasty bean juice, and shared with the humans with whom they now occupy the same ecosystem. And I'd like to believe that the energy, or the umph, or what John might call the logos/word these coffee grounds create in others will ultimately be transformed into acts of love and service.

So why all this talk of coffee?

Jesus, and the disciples, and the apostles, and the earliest Jesus-followers, and really us too at times, all live or have lived in a world that presupposes humans exist in a vacuum seal. Luke's gospel, I believe, has a gentle-but-pointed way of reminding us of our seal. The prodigal sons seeking pieces of their father's affection, that's the older one and the younger one; the priest and the Levite avoiding the injured man on the Jericho Road; the Rich Young Ruler too tied to his wealth; and the disciples in their own moments of desiring power, all seek out things that are in their own best interest. They've been programmed to apply a kind of Torah that asks what they are righted to instead of to whom

and to what they are called – doing, living what is right! Torah, for them, and too often for us, is not a tool to help shape our love for God and neighbor. It's a tool to justify an elevated love of self over God and neighbor.

But a funny thing happened on his way to the wilderness. Jesus was baptized, and upon being baptized, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove upon him. That's a fancy way of saying that God's overwhelming sense of love, empathy, kindness, and creative breath flowed through Jesus' life force. Jesus comes up from baptismal waters broken like a coffee seal. For the rest of his life and ministry he sees himself as wholly connected to everything around him. And his every action is oriented toward the love of God and neighbor, and all of creation.

I think what the Holy Spirit allows Jesus to do is to see the difference between life and lifelessness. Jesus can see what it means to be lost in a desire for an inheritance or a parent's affirmation; Jesus can see what it means to be so lost in your own security you forget the wellbeing of others; Jesus can see what it means to be lost in an all-consuming material wealth; Jesus can see what it means to be lost in the emptiness of systems that promote uneven distributions of power – Jesus knows that wielding power unjustly and retributively won't cure an absence of power.

Jesus sees life, experiences life, abundant life, in connecting to neighbors. He knows their names. He knows their stories. He not only acknowledges and affirms their createdness, but he also celebrates it! And Jesus shares his God-given fulfillment with anyone who wants it. He's also 100% willing to receive the sacred giftedness of others. That's the Spirit!

And here's the best news all day, Millbrook. Today's text in Acts, the sequel to Luke, tells us that the same Spirit that infused Jesus at his baptism infused the apostles, and all who will follow, on the day of Pentecost.

We get this wonderful account of miracles. A thousand tongues speaking a thousand languages from a thousand generations. Dead languages, live languages, languages not yet imagined, spoken by representatives from all over the world, and each understood and received.

There is wind, like a LOT of wind.

And there is fire. SO much fire!

And it's really a wonderful story. But I gotta be honest with you, the miracle isn't capturing my attention this morning, and I know that doesn't seem right, because vacuum-sealed coffee has. Maybe it's because we have Babel and other language apps at our disposal, and through the power of Netflix we can stream our favorite international programming in the dubbing and subtitles of our choice, and we can ride rides at Universal Studios that have all the wind and fire we would care to procure, thank you very much.

None of these are reasons for my disinterest in miracles. We are living in hyper-partisan, hyper-polarized, hyper-selfish times. There isn't one tower of Babel, there are millions of them, maybe even eight billion of them scattered and secluded in their own little spaces of self-righteousness and disconnectedness. What we desperately need is a world that practices empathy and acts upon its findings. That is to say, we need a world where we know and listen to our neighbors, and we center our living on meeting the collective needs of community.

Don't get lost in the mechanics of Pentecost. Some kind of cosmic injection of God's Spirit – God's empathy, love, compassion, and creative breath in a bottle – infused the city of Jerusalem, and empowered by that infusion, a whole gaggle of people communicated with authenticity and neighborliness. On one glorious morning, everyone prophesied, and everyone saw visions and dreams, and everyone listened, really listened to one another, and the Spirit fell fresh upon every imaginable kind of person.

The event was fleeting, but its long-term effects were not. Later in this same chapter, we hear about the Acts church, the group of believers who remained in Jerusalem, inspired by the Spirit:

Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:43-47, NRSV).

The Spirit infused God's people in such a way as to make them eager to communicate and connect with one another. The Spirit empowers each of us to do the same. And that's no small thing. In fact, it's the very reason we celebrate Pentecost. We are just as capable of building a kind of community that cares for one another in deed, word, and spirit.

Think about this. How lasting, how powerful, how good would the story of Jesus be without Pentecost? Not all that great. I think it would have been like a vacuum-sealed brick of coffee. Yes, a thousand times, yes,

Jesus created a community with his earliest followers that exemplified the authentic human experience. But that harvest is never realized, not fully, if it doesn't spread beyond the inner circle into the whole of Jerusalem, and eventually, in every direction, and to every continent. The Gospel, friends, isn't a brick to be sealed, it's a bag to be opened. And Pentecost winds are ready to scatter both its contents and aroma.

Look, I know this has been a rough season. The headlines are doing their best to betray a Spirit-filled world. Humanity is tormented by violence and apathy: war, mass shootings, domestic abuse, legislative abuse, denominational abuse, the kind that cuts uncomfortably close to our own roots, just a whole mess of meanness. This morning, I want to hear the howls of a mighty wind, and the chorus of a thousand diverse voices, and feel the heat of a fiery flame that can sweep away all this lifelessness in an instant.

Why can't we be the spark that gets it going, Millbrook? Because it seems to me that those first believers didn't have to do anything all that miraculous to galvanize the momentum gained by the Spirit. They lived with empathy, and they let the findings of that empathy guide their living.

Are you a stranger in a strange land? How can we welcome you as a neighbor? And how might we reconsider our own customs and traditions that deem you strange instead of neighborly?

What's our current language? How might we infuse it with love to listen and speak more effectively and humanely to others?

And not for nothing, Millbrook, we do have policies that insure us against damage from fire, and winds, and even earthquake. Perhaps today is the day we allow the Spirit to stir up a storm in our own hearts

Unsealed
Bob Stillerman
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and minds. What might one voice, or ten voices, or a hundred voices of empathy generate for our world?

I don't want to be a brick, Millbrook. Somebody else can be hardened. Somebody else can be sealed off. Somebody else can recreate Babel. Somebody else can land with a thud.

The contents of this community are too good to be sealed.

It's the day of Pentecost, y'all. I vote for the woosssssshhhh of the Spirit.

I wanna hear the drip-drip-dripping of kindness percolating.

I wanna hear the beep, beep, beeping of carafes ready to be served.

I wanna hear porcelain cups clanking on saucers, rhythms of holy conversations.

I wanna serve up the kind of brew that singes our tongues, and puts a fire in our belly, and a little giddy-up in our Spirits!

Good friends, may the Spirit fall fresh upon us! And may it begin today.

Amen.