Sunday, May 19, 2002
FILLED WITH NEW WINE
Acts 2:1-8,12-13

During my 45 years of ministry and preaching, I have read the story of what took place on the day of Pentecost, as told by Luke in the "Acts of the Apostles," countless times. Yet this past week, in reading the story again, I came to a new understanding of its meaning for you and me in our everyday living.

First, a little bit of background information. Pentecost was an ancient Jewish celebration which traditionally took place 50 days after the Passover Festival. The word "Pente" means five or, in this case, 50 — ten times five. Because it was a widely observed Jewish celebration, the early followers of Jesus, who were all Jewish, were gathered together in one place. Then something unexpected took place.

Luke uses two different metaphors to tell the story. One metaphor is that the experience was like the "rush of a violent wind." Then he talks about "tongues, as of fire." Both of these images come from the Old Testament, where God's Spirit is frequently described in terms of "wind" or "breath." God's holy presence is also often pictured as being like a "fire." It was a "pillar of fire" that guided the people of Israel as they journeyed from Egypt to the promised land.

The followers of Jesus, who were gathered together on Pentecost and were now again made aware of God's Spirit among them, began to act so strangely, so out of character, that they were accused by onlookers of being "filled with new wine." And they were filled with new wine in a metaphorical sense. They were so powerfully aware of God's Holy Spirit that they were imagining a new world. Imagination and God's Holy Spirit are closely connected. I'm going to say a lot more about that later.

Notice I said that they were freshly aware of God's Holy Spirit, and it wasn't the first time. One of the other stories in the New Testament in the gospel of John tells us that after the resurrection, in a meeting Jesus had with his disciples on Easter Sunday evening, "He breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" That Spirit was already present in them. He was reminding them that God's Spirit was present among them and within them. He was re-awakening it. Now the Pentecost experience once again helps them in the "re-discovery" of God's Holy Spirit.

Why do I call it a "re-discovery" or "re-awakening" of God's Spirit? You have heard me say so many times in sermons and Bible studies, that you are probably tired of hearing it, that each human being — including each one of you — is created in God's image. That means God's Holy Spirit is in you from the moment you take your first breath. In the creation story, God breathes into Adam and Eve the "breath of life." It is furthermore the testimony of the Bible that God's Spirit was present in creating the universe. This Spirit of God, the Ultimate Imaginer, was present very powerfully in Jesus, and it is alive in you and in every human being.

Now let's examine in more detail the connection between what we call the Holy Spirit and the marvelous gift and power of human imagination. I am more and more convinced that Christianity as a way of life, based on the nature and will of God revealed to you through the life and ministry of Jesus, depends largely upon your ability to imagine. The ability to imagine is another way of talking about God's Spirit working in you. When your imagination is active, that's another way of saying that God's Spirit is active in and through you.

I believe that on that day of Pentecost, the followers of Jesus, with the help of the Holy Spirit, were imagining a new world. That, of course, is what the prophets did in the Old Testament, and it is what all inspired prophets have done. They were filled with hopeful imagination, and it is what every visionary leader has. The power of imagination has preceded every movement to improve the lot of human beings in this world. Martin Luther King Jr.'s “I have a dream” speech on August 28, 1963, is an excellent example of the power of imagination — of God’s Spirit at work. Listen to some of his words as he imagines a new future:

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood. I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

Unfortunately, sometimes as you are growing up, you are taught that imagination is something that needs to be outgrown. Children have plenty of it. Too often, however, they are told that it is foolish and won’t help them make a decent living. Yet Albert Einstein said that there were children who could solve some of the problems he wrestled with because they still possessed a vital and unbridled imagination. He was talking about creativity, which he claimed was as important as knowledge.

But notice how often parents or teachers will say to children, “That’s only your imagination,” or “You’re only imagining things.”

The writer Jessamyn West wrote: “If I were a mother or teacher or anyone with responsibility for the young, I should be even more concerned for the imaginative development of my children than for their muscular development. Every day the mother and teacher should show the child by example and precept how to escape the prison of self, which unless it imagines the state of others, cannot help but be narrow and impoverished... The most important question a mother can ask her child each night is not, ‘What did you learn today?’ or ‘Did you go to the bathroom?’ or ‘Have you said your prayers?’ but ‘What did you imagine today?'”

In the Lewis Carroll classic “Through the Looking Glass,” the White Queen advises Alice to practice believing six impossible things before breakfast. Sometimes what you dismiss as impossible only seems that way because you just can’t imagine it.

All creativity is preceded by imagination. Before there is anything, there is a vision of something that is yet to be. All empathy is preceded by imagination as you try to imagine what is going on in the life of someone who is having a difficult problem.

There’s that old story about the dedication of a magnificent new building. At the dedication, the Master of Ceremonies lamented the fact that the architect had died before seeing his work completed. He said, “It’s a shame that he couldn’t see it finished before he died.” To which some perceptive person in the crowd responded, “But he did see it. That’s why it’s here.”

The followers of Jesus were thought to be filled with new wine because on the day of Pentecost, through the power of God’s Spirit, they were able to imagine a new world where the barriers which traditionally divide people no longer existed. The power of God’s Spirit — their imagination — had been re-awakened. This new wine of God’s Holy Spirit helped them to

imagine a world in which God's love would be known and practiced by all people, a world in which people would love their neighbors as themselves. That's what Martin Luther King Jr. was talking about. That world, of course, is not yet here, but it will never be here unless we keep imagining it.

In every area of life, the lack of imagination is a sign of disaster. People say it all the time, "I just can't imagine." Last fall, following the terrible disaster of September 11, people kept asking, how could it all have happened, where did we fail? Thomas Friedman was very perceptive when he said, "It was a failure of our imagination." We couldn't think outside the box. We couldn't imagine someone using one of our own commercial airplanes as a weapon of destruction.

How often have you said or heard someone say, "I just can't imagine what she sees in him." That's an admission of blindness. It's an indirect confession of your limited way of perceiving.

One of the most fascinating books I've read in the past few months is "The Man Who Listens to Horses," the story of a real-life horse whisperer. It's written by Monty Roberts and is his personal story of how he learned to listen to horses, and in so doing, learned to train horses — or "start" them, as he calls it — in a short period of time. The old method of "breaking a horse" took a lot more time and made the horse an adversary rather than a partner. His father, who was also a trainer of horses, never believed that his son could do what he was doing. Even when he watched his son train horses using his new method of listening to horses, his father denied it was happening. He just couldn't imagine it.

A ministerial colleague tells this story about himself. He was in the second grade and was in love with a classmate named Rosemary. She said she only wanted to be friends. However, he imagined that she would eventually fall in love with him, they would date for about 15 years, and then get married and have lots of children. He desperately wanted to know her feelings for him. So he devised a method. It was a simple note — no poetry, no romance, just a simple questionnaire. In block letters, the note said, "DO YOU LOVE ME?" And then underneath, two boxes, one marked YES, and the other NO. It was a kind of love ballot, hopefully forcing her to decide. There was no box to mark "JUST WANT TO BE FRIENDS."

He had everything figured out except how to pass the note without getting caught. The teacher intercepted it, walked to the front of the class with the note in her hand, and said to the class, "Robin, shall I read this to the class?" He said, "Please, don't read it." But she did. She unfolded it and very slowly and deliberately read it to the class. Everyone laughed, and the sound of it to Robin was awful. He couldn't bring himself to look at Rosemary. He remembered thinking that even the box marked NO would have been preferable to this.

Why would any teacher do such a thing? She lacked imagination. There is never any reason to shame a child or to embarrass any child. When the powerful have the powerless at their mercy, they need to show mercy — or get into some other kind of work.

People often do cruel things to others because of a lack of imagination. When you use your imagination, it is God's Holy Spirit working in and through you. By using your imagination, you can enter into the life of another person in a positive way. To do that, you must quit thinking only of yourself and live vicariously. You have to try to imagine how another person might feel.

Last week I read again the story of the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. There was one young, brave Black girl who walked through the crowd of white

hecklers every morning to get into the building. She needed a police escort for her safety. One morning, a white man stepped in front of her and spit savagely into her face. She looked straight ahead, and she walked on into the school with amazing dignity. Any imaginative person present would feel the horrible wound to her sense of pride. The man who did the spitting lacked imagination or he could not have done what he did. If he had re-awakened his imagination, he would have felt inside himself all her loneliness and fear, and it would have been impossible for him to add to it. It would have been like spitting on himself.

But when you use your imagination, when you let God's Holy Spirit be awakened in you, miracles take place.

Years ago in Manhattan, New York City, a man stood on the ledge of a tall building and was about to commit suicide by jumping off. A large crowd had gathered, and some in the crowd were mocking him, saying, "Go ahead, jump." A police rescue squad arrived and tried to talk him down. The man was Puerto Rican and had apparently been denied permission to the NYC Police Academy because he failed the physical. He wanted nothing more in life than to be a police officer.

A tough, gray-haired lieutenant on the rescue squad was finally successful in talking the man down. A reporter asked him how he did it. The lieutenant said, "The man kept saying, 'I want to be a police officer, I want to be a police officer.' So I said to him, 'Tonight, you are a police officer. You are one of us.' The man who had threatened to jump then said that he wanted to touch my badge, so I handed my badge to him, and he touched it and kissed it. He kept touching it and kissing it. And then he said that nobody loved him. And so I told him that I loved him. I hugged him for a long time and told him that I loved him. And that's when he decided to come down the ladder with me."

Do you suppose that someone in the crowd who lacked imagination might have said, "That's one strange guy, that police officer. Sounds peculiar to me. Could he be a homosexual?" They could also have accused him of being filled with new wine. Imagine that. Amen.