Sunday, May 15, 2005
HOLY BREATH
Genesis 2:7; Acts 2:1-4; John 20:19-22

Most of you probably don't think of your breath or someone else's breath as being holy. Everyone knows about bad breath, but not about holy breath. Yet in the Bible, the Hebrew word for wind or breath is the same as the word for "spirit." That's also true of the Greek word for wind or breath. In the first creation story in the book of Genesis, you are told, "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, 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." In other words, the "holy breath of God," which is another way of saying the "spirit of God," was active in creation.

In the second creation story in the book of Genesis, you are told, "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." Holy breath! You are what you are because God breathed holy breath into you — that is, God breathed God's own spirit into you.

You find this same theme in the ministry of Jesus. One of the most extraordinary promises he made to his followers was that after he was gone from them, they would not be left alone. They would continue to experience the power of God's Holy Spirit among them and in their personal lives. How this promise was fulfilled is told in two different stories in the New Testament.

In the book of Acts, you are told that on Pentecost, a Jewish holiday, the followers of Jesus were all together in one place. In that gathering, something unusual and unexpected happened. They felt the power of God's Spirit, or what I like to call God's energy, within them and among them as never before. It was an indescribable event. In trying to explain it, the writer of the book of Acts compared it to the "rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting," and to "tongues of fire resting on each one of them."

A different account of a new awareness of God's Holy Spirit as experienced by the followers of Jesus is given in the gospel of John. Here you are told that his followers were gathered together on the evening of that first Easter Sunday. The doors were locked because they were afraid of the authorities. These followers had received reports about the resurrection of Jesus. Some of them did not believe it. Others were afraid that they too might be arrested. So they locked the door.

All of a sudden, in the midst of that frightened group, and in spite of the locked door, Jesus stood among them. "Peace be with you," he said. Then he did something which might seem strange to you:

"He breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

"He breathed on them." Remember the creation stories in the book of Genesis. In one of the stories, you heard this amazing statement: "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into him the breath of life."

Ancient people believed that the breath of God was the same as the Spirit of God. They also believed that, as far as human beings are concerned, your spirit or your life is contained in

your breath. It's not too difficult to understand how they arrived at this conclusion. Without breath, there is no life. When one stops breathing, one dies.

At birth, life outside the mother's womb begins with the baby breathing on its own. Its heart has already been beating inside the womb for a number of months. But the baby has not been breathing on its own. The necessary supply of oxygen until birth comes from the mother. So there is an inseparable connection between life and breath. It is holy breath.

So it is that the gospel of John's version of the experience of the Holy Spirit in and among the followers of Jesus is a kind of retelling of the story of creation. Jesus is re-creating his disciples. How is he doing it? With holy breath — the breath of God's Spirit. He breathed on them. It was holy breath, the breath of God. He was reminding them that God's Spirit was already within and among them. In their fear, they had forgotten about it. Now they were experiencing it all over again.

Holy breath! You each have within you from your birth the breath of God, which is to say the Spirit of God. What the church from the beginning has called the Holy Spirit is the continuing presence of God's loving energy in your life and in all creation.

The story in the book of Acts describing Pentecost reminds you of this in another way. You are told that on that day there were gathered together in one place people "from every nation under heaven." The storyteller then gives you a partial list of the nations of that time.

Why? It's a way of telling you that God's Spirit is for all people and is in all people everywhere. It's universal. Other writers in the Bible reaffirm this. What is unique about this story of Pentecost in the book of Acts is that the writer wants you to know that people from all nations on the earth were present when the Spirit was experienced in a fresh way. Think of what that means. All people of all nations are not only the destination of the good news of God in Jesus, but they are also the point of origin. Now people of every nation can say, "It began with us. We were represented there."

To understand the Holy Breath of God, it is necessary to understand that the good news of God's love doesn't only extend to people throughout creation; it has been present everywhere from the beginning.

The story of Pentecost reminds you that there is no second-hand, third-hand, or fourth-hand faith. There is no church or nation that can say, "It belonged to us, and now we are going to give it to you because of our good will, evangelism, and mission work." Everyone was represented there on that first day in the same way that God has breathed into every human being the Holy Breath of God.

The story of Pentecost removes all grounds for any sense of arrogance and superiority that is too often found in the church because of the notion that the salvation of other people in the world depends on the church's behavior. The book of Acts says it started in all the world at the same time. And that's what the book of Genesis says too: "Then the Lord God formed human beings from the dust of the ground and breathed into them the breath of life."

Nowhere can you read that God only breathed into one kind of people, or one race, or one nation, or people of one religion, the "breath of life." God's holy breath is breathed into each one of us at the moment of our birth. God's Spirit is always at work in creation. The problem is that many times we are not aware of it until later or until someone identifies it.

Although this Holy Breath, the Spirit of God, is with us and in creation always, there are times when we are not aware of it. In the same way, there are times when we are not aware of the air which surrounds us and which we are breathing. Then it's easy to take air for granted. Other times we are very much aware of the air and the wind, especially when the wind is strong or in a tornado. And if you have ever had trouble breathing, you know how important it is. So it is with the Holy Spirit of God.

What are some of the ways in which you can recognize God's Holy Breath? Some people asked the Apostle Paul that question in the early church. He first gave some examples of behavior that tell you where God's Spirit is not at work. God's Spirit is not present in jealousy, idolatry, strife, or envy (Galatians 5:19). "By contrast," he said, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22). These are the signs, the footprints, the handprints that God's Holy Breath is at work in your life, the lives of others, and in church congregations.

I am convinced that First-Plymouth Church, according to Paul's description, is in the best sense a Pentecostal congregation, Spirit-filled. Here are several examples that illustrate this.

This congregation strives to be inclusive. It is not afraid of diversity. It is not afraid of new ways of understanding the wonderful story of God's love as expressed in Jesus. People come here from different places, different backgrounds, and even different faith perspectives, believing they can learn from each other. There is room in this place for everyone because the spirit of acceptance and love lives here, rather than a spirit of judgment and rejection. You can hear the gospel through the screen of your own heritage, background, and life experience, but you also come to hear the same message of the spirit of Jesus: "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself."

This congregation is also a church of Pentecost because it could be tempted to only look back with nostalgia, but instead, it is not afraid to look ahead with faith. In its one hundred thirty-nine years of life, instead of resting on past accomplishments, which are many, this congregation is looking bravely ahead to the future.

Here are some examples. During the past several years, and in the next few years, there will be many changes in our program staff because of retirements and illness. We are planning for these changes very carefully and deliberately. Therefore, I am confident that this congregation will continue to grow even stronger in its ministries and outreach.

In the past several years, we have spent over two million dollars in much-needed building renovations and improvements. These renovations include new windows, new air conditioning equipment, new boilers for heating, new front steps, a beautifully remodeled youth room, new carpeting in the chapel and Pilgrim Hall, new floors in the lower level, a completely renovated downstairs tower room that involved mold removal, a new outdoor classroom that gives the church building an inviting entrance from the north side of the building, and additional parking. There still remains some work to be completed, and hopefully, it will be done within the next year.

This summer, we will be replacing all of our television equipment because it is 17 years old and obsolete. We cannot even find parts for some of it when it needs repair. This project will also include some major improvements in our sound system. To help pay for the new television and sound equipment and to replenish some of our reserve funds, which have been

spent during the past several years, a capital funds drive with a goal of one million dollars will begin within the next four or five weeks. It is absolutely necessary for this drive to be successful for the future of the congregation.

The Holy breath of God is present in you and in this congregation. You may have forgotten about this breath of God. It's possible that you could be attempting to live your life without it. You could rest in the nostalgia of the past. This congregation could try to rest in the successes of the past, but the Spirit of God keeps calling you and this church forward to new life and new opportunities for ministry. That's the meaning of the story of Pentecost. Amen.