Pentecost Sunday

OSP, 2023

Educators and scientists

entrepreneurs and parents

doctors and spiritual directors

all recognize the importance

of asking questions

but especially of asking the right questions.

The ancient Greeks understood this in spades

and we inherited from them the so-called Socratic method:

a style of education rooted in questions

that prod us into discovering the underlying assumptions

of our positions and beliefs.

This questioning approach is not meant to intimidate

but to provoke “productive discomfort”

coaxing one into increasingly beneficial levels

of honesty and insight.

Some insist that certain explorations

benefit from specific and sophisticated questions

that only the specialist can ask.

However, there is also general wisdom afoot

that prizes questions posed by non-experts

who are happily naïve about what can or cannot be asked.

Sometimes the naïve question

is a first step towards fresh wisdom

and experts can inadvertently get in the way of that wisdom.

When it comes to questions about God or Jesus or the Spirit,

when it comes to questions about Pentecost or other feasts

sometimes the experts get in the way.

So in my preparation for this morning’s preaching

I was gifted with an unexpected yet eye opening conversation

with an imaginative 9 year old

about the meaning of Pentecost.

I was staying with her family and had brought my laptop along

trying to find a fresh angle on preaching this feast

that I have preached at least 3 dozen times.

For her birthday a few weeks before

Samantha had gotten a small robotics kit

and was in the process of constructing a mechanical spider.

When she asked me what I was doing

I told her I was trying to write a sermon for Pentecost.

She wasn’t sure what that was.

When she asked about it

I told her that it was a special day of thanking God

for sharing the Spirit of Jesus with us.

When I asked her if she knew about the Holy Spirit,

like any self-respecting 4th grader in Catholic School,

she said “of course.”

She then went on to explain that the Spirit was God’s breath;

it was like oxygen

and that when we prayed we could breathe in God

that helped us to be good.

Then, this budding theologian, looked at the mechanical spider

she had named twitchy in the process of its construction.

She turned it on and as it awkwardly crawled around

she said “twitchy doesn’t have breath.

He can move but has no oxygen.

He will never be able to breathe in God.”

Too bad she couldn’t be here this morning to preach!

The advice to “just breathe” is ubiquitous.

It is on t-shirts and mugs, placards and greeting cards.

It is woven into the instruction of everyone from yoga instructors

too emergency room personnel.

“Just breathe” has been the inspiration for everything from

self-help books and videos

to music by Pearle Jam.

The wisdom here is rooted in [great science](https://www.npr.org/2010/12/06/131734718/just-breathe-body-has-a-built-in-stress-reliever)

that demonstrates how deep breathing

not only helps us relax but can positively effect

the heart, the brain, our digestive and immune systems

and even help people manage pain.

A number of years ago I was preparing to preside at a wedding.

The couple had been together for a number of years

but wanted their marriage blessed in the church.

A few months before the wedding

they discovered they were pregnant

and scheduled a sonogram.

They gave me the results in a sealed envelope

and wanted me to include the gender reveal

as part of the ceremony.

As I have never seen a sonogram up close

and had no idea how to interpret one

my anxiety was even higher than usual.

In the sacristy before the wedding

I needed to open this envelope

and see if I could decipher the results

so that this reveal moment wouldn’t be revealing

how dumb the presider was.

With a rapidly increasing pulse

I unsealed the envelope which held a single sheet of paper

with a smiley face and a message that read

“Just Breathe, IT’S A GIRL!”

Pentecost is ordinarily described

as a feast commemorating the 50th day after the resurrection

when God’s spirit descended upon the apostles

and the church was born.

That description is alternately true and problematic.

On the second Sunday of Easter, the gospel we read from John

reported that on the day of the resurrection itself

Jesus appeared to his disciples

showed them his hands and feet

breathed on them and said, “receive the Holy Spirit.”

Furthermore, it is a well-documented early Christian belief

that the church was born not on Pentecost

but on [Good Friday](https://luminousdarkcloud.wordpress.com/2013/09/23/st-john-chrysostom-on-the-birth-of-the-church-on-the-cross/) when blood and water

flowed from the pierced heart of Christ.

So what exactly are we celebrating today?

In its Jewish origins, Pentecost was a harvest feast

the harvest of wheat.

Eventually that harvest was given an historical significance

recalling Moses’ harvesting of the Torah on Mt. Sinai.

In its Christian reformulation

Pentecost became a harvesting of the New Law in Christ

to love God and neighbor as one

and a regifting of Divine Breath, of Holy Oxygen

so that Jesus disciples could “breathe in God and do good”

could exhale with God’s Spirit and continue Pentecosting.

Recently I was on one of those long flights

that gave me a few hours to get some writing done

but then left enough time in the trip

to turn on the flight entertainment.

While the viewing options were extensive

feature films seldom intrigue me

and instead I am drawn to the documentaries.

There I stumbled upon a Pentecost movie.

It is called *Girl Rising* and narrates the journey

of 9 girls around the globe

struggling for self-empowerment through education.

The film and the “Girl Rising” movement

were inspired by the story of Malala Yousafzai (YOU-shuf-sigh)

the young Pakistani activist for women’s education

who at 15 was shot in the head for her advocacy

surviving to become the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize

and a graduate of Oxford University where she is now a fellow.

In the spirit of Malala

*Girl Rising* is the remarkable tale of parallel stories

Of 9 extraordinary young girls

struggling for education, liberation and self-determination.

Like that of Wadley from Haiti

an eager and smart 10 year old

who excelled in her studies.

One day she had successfully recited from memory

the final speech of the Haitian Leader Toussaint Louverture

who tried to win independence for the country.

Wadley’s triumph, however, was short lived

for that afternoon, after school, at 4:53 p.m.

a magnitude 7 earthquake struck Haiti

killing or injuring a half a million people

and affecting the lives of 7 times that number

including Wadley

whose school was destroyed

whose mother’s house and business were decimated

and who now spent her days carrying water

to their corner of a tent city

instead of being in school.

Then one day, a miracle occurred

for on the edge of the tent city

a makeshift school arose.

Wadley went racing for her books and returned

to sit on a bench eager to learn from her old teacher

but the teacher would not let her stay

because her mother had no money.

She left rejected but the next day

returned to the tent school

determined to stay.

When her teacher told her to leave

because she could not pay

Wadley said over and over again, “no, no, no”

and in the revolutionary spirit of Toussaint Louverture

declared “If you send me away

I will come back every day until I can stay.”

The teacher relented, a tent-school filled with oxygen

a Spirit of Wisdom descended

and Wadley could breathe again.

I never thought of the gift of education as a Pentecost

I was probably privileged with it too much.

But for Wadley, and Malala, and other girl’s rising

it was a liberating spirit, a holy oxygen

an inspired buoyancy that allowed them to rise,

to ascend, and in turn to do good.

We don’t have to look very far to see deflated spirits

folk with shattered dreams

children with punctured aspirations.

But as disciples of Jesus

gifted with God’s own spirit at baptism, and again in confirmation

renewed at every eucharist

and uniquely celebrated on this dynamic feast

we are commissioned to inflate, to aerate

to oxygenate those spirits and dreams and aspirations

so others can do good as well.

In other words, we are anointed to keep Pentecosting

to facilitator new and continuing gusts of God

no matter how modest or unseen,

so that the Holy Spirit can renew the face of the earth.

On my last day with the young theologian Samantha and her family

we visited a small but lively neighborhood festival.

There we saw a young girl, about Samantha’s age

holding in front of her a huge pink balloon

easily twice her size.

Suddenly, a kid whizzed by on his bike

and with some unseen instrument

jabbed at the balloon which dramatically exploded.

The girl was at first stunned and then began to cry.

Samantha gave me a “do something” look

then took the cash I pulled from my pocket

walked across the street to the balloon vender

and bought a duplicate miniature dirigible

which she delivered to her new friend:

smile restored

spirit inflated

oxygen rendered

Pentecost reenacted.

If the church ever had a “do something” feast, it is this one

a feast prodding us to allow God’s energizing Spirit

to flow through us, together, as God remakes a world

filled with too many deflated lives and punctured dreams.

And so we invoke the [poet’s blessing](https://paintedprayerbook.com/2013/05/14/pentecost-when-we-breathe-together/) and pray:

This is the blessing  
we cannot speak  
by ourselves.

This is the blessing  
we cannot summon  
by our own devices,  
cannot shape  
to our purpose,  
cannot bend  
to our will.

This is the blessing  
that comes  
when we leave behind  
our aloneness  
when we gather  
together  
when we turn  
toward one another.

This is the blessing  
that blazes among us  
when we speak  
the words  
strange to our ears

when we finally listen  
into the chaos

when [at last] we breathe together …

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.