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.