

2024 05 19 – *Too Deep for Words*

Scripture: Acts 1:1-21
Romans 8:22-27 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Fifty days had passed since Passover, since Jesus' death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection appearances. Jesus' disciples were gathered together in Jerusalem for the Festival of Weeks, Shavuot (sha-voo-OAT), the spring harvest festival. But this year was different. Jesus was gone. They were without their rabbi and no doubt struggling to appreciate the celebratory atmosphere that was all around them in the city..

But as they sat there in the room the disciples heard "what sounded like a violent rushing wind from heaven," and then "something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire." The tongues of fire separated and came to rest of their heads. And then the craziest thing happened: "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages." People from other countries, people gathered in Jerusalem for the festival, heard them and were amazed and disturbed that these Galileans were able to communicate in their languages.

It is this moment, this Spirit-filled moment, which is celebrated each year as the birthday of the Christian church. This was the moment in which the disciples truly became apostles, ones who were sent. This was the moment in which they received the inspiration, the vision, and the dream of who they could be and what they could create. As Peter quoted from the book of Joel, "Even on the most

insignificant of my people, both women and men, I will pour out my Spirit in those days and they will prophesy.”

It was a new beginning. It was an exciting time for the apostles. But it was also a hard and a frightening time. Beginnings can often be challenging. Not least because they are usually preceded by a time of letting go, a time of grief, a time of mourning.

I remember when I arrived here in Swift Current nearly ten years ago. I had just gone through a very difficult experience at Calling Lakes Centre. I had led that much-beloved education and retreat centre (PCTC) through a challenging process of closure and when I left they were just putting the property up for sale. I arrived here not really knowing what my next call should or would be. The 11-month appointment that you were offering seemed the perfect solution. I was feeling pretty beaten-up and desperately needed some inspiration and some healing. In this congregation I found the presence of a Spirit that was and is both comforting and inspiring. Within a few months of my arrival I felt like I had found my new home.

I know that all of us have gone through similar experiences in our lives. Think of all the times of transition in your life: graduation from high school, a new job, marriage, the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, retirement or a move to a new place. These are all both endings and beginnings. These all require the ability to dream, to hope, to see beyond what is to what can be. They are both joy-filled and scary as heck. They are the kind of life changes in which we need

to know that we are not alone. They are the times when we need the guidance of the Spirit, a Spirit that appears in many different forms including that of a parent, a friend, or a mentor.

Before I came here, it was a colleague who reminded me that I didn't have to have everything figured out right away. He was the one who suggested the possibility of a shorter appointment. As I arrived here, I was already working with a counsellor who was helping me deal with all the emotions associated with such a difficult ending. When I came here, I could feel the Spirit moving not only in me, but also in every one of you.

That Spirit is still here present among us and it will lead this congregation as we move through all the endings and new beginnings that are ahead of us. In a few weeks we will be celebrating the 99th anniversary of the formation of The United Church of Canada. Your Leadership Team will be taking the worship service on June 9th as you both celebrate the life of this congregation and hope for what is to come for First United, here in Swift Current and for The United Church as a whole.

But what is it that we are hoping for? What is it that we need to let go of? What is it that we need to grasp onto? In the book of Romans, Chapter 8, Paul writes,

In hope we are saved. But hope is not hope if its object is seen;

Why does one hope for what one sees? And hoping for what we cannot see means awaiting it with patient endurance.

Yikes, “patient endurance.” That sounds pretty brutal. But it is our reality. Often we do not know what it is that we are hoping for. We really don’t know what that “new beginning” is going to look like. We don’t yet know what steps we need to take to get there. So our hope has no form or substance.

This is where the Spirit comes in. Paul assures us that when we come to those times in our lives and in our church where we really don’t know what to pray for or even how to pray, then the Spirit will intercede for us. The Spirit will express our pleas “with groanings too deep for words.” Think of those times when silent meditation feels more appropriate than spoken prayer. Think of those times when walking the path, sitting on a rock or even hugging a tree feels more appropriate than words. Think of those times when punching a pillow or screaming in your locked vehicle feels more appropriate than writing a letter. These are the times when the work that is being done within us is “too deep for words.” These are Spirit-filled times.

Paul wrote these words about twenty-five years after that first Pentecost. The church was still going through its original birthing process and already congregations were getting impatient. They wanted to know what this new world was going to look like. When was creation going to be free of violence and corruption? When were they going to experience God’s reign of peace and justice? When would everyone understand each other like they did at Pentecost.

Two thousand years later we have a greater appreciation of the time frame that is required for this rebirthing to take place. But even as we wait, we know that the

Spirit is continually working through us to fulfill God's promise. Even as we anticipate yet another new beginning in our lives and in our church, let us be comforted in the knowledge that we are not alone. The Spirit of Wind and Flame, the Spirit of Love is with us, and will intercede whenever our prayers are too deep for words.

May it be so. Amen.