

The Gospel of the Holy Spirit

A sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor*

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Did you know the word “conspire” means to breathe together? Take a breath. Now blow it out again. There! You have just launched a conspiracy. You can hear the word “spirit” in there too – to conspire – to be filled with the same spirit, to be enlivened by the same wind. That is why the word appeals to me, anyhow. What happens between us when we come together to worship God is that the Holy Spirit swoops in and out among us, knitting us together through the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, the breaths we breathe. It can happen with two people and it can happen with two thousand people. It can scare us or comfort us, confuse us or clarify things for us, but as far as I can tell the Holy Spirit never bullies us. We are always free to choose whether or how we will respond.

Now take another breath. If you have studied earth science, then you know that our gorgeous blue-green planet is wrapped in a protective veil we call the atmosphere, which separates the air we breathe from the cold vacuum of outer space. Beneath this veil is all the air that ever was. No cosmic planet-cleaning company comes along every hundred years or so to suck out all the old air and pump in some new. The same ancient air just keeps recirculating, which means that every time any of us breathes we breathe star dust left over from the creation of the earth. We breathe brontosaurus breath and pterodactyl breath. We breathe air that has circulated through the rain forests of Kenya and air that has turned yellow with sulfur over Mexico City. We breathe the same air that Plato breathed, and Mozart and Michelangelo, not to mention Hitler... Every time we breathe, we take in what was once some baby’s first breath, or some dying person’s last. We take it in, we use it to live, and when we breathe out it carries some of us with it into the next person, or tree, or blue-tailed skink, who uses it to live.

When Jesus let go of his last breath – willingly, we believe, for love of us – that breath hovered in the air in front of him for a moment and then it was set loose on earth. It was such pungent breath – so full of passion, so full of life – that it did not simply dissipate as so many breaths do. It grew, in strength and in volume, until it was a mighty wind, which God sent spinning through an upper room in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. God wanted to make sure that Jesus’ friends were the inheritors of Jesus’ breath, and it worked.

There they were, about a hundred and twenty of them, Luke says, all moping around wondering what they were going to do without Jesus, when they heard a holy hurricane headed their way. Before any of them could defend themselves, that mighty wind had blown through the entire house, striking sparks that burst

into flames above their heads, and they were filled up with it – every one of them was filled to the gills with God’s own breath. Then something clamped down on them and the air came out of them in languages they did not even know they knew.

Like a room full of bagpipes all going at once, they set up such a racket that they drew a crowd. People from all over the world who were in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost came leaning in the windows and pushing through the doors, surprised to hear someone speaking their own language so far from home. Parthians stuck their heads through the door expecting to see other Parthians, and Libyans looked around for other Libyans, but what they saw instead were a bunch of Galileans – rural types from northern Israel dressed in the equivalent of first-century overalls – all of them going on and on about God’s mighty acts like a bunch of Ph.D.’s in middle eastern languages.

Before the day was over, the church had grown from one hundred twenty to more than three thousand. Shy people had become bold, scared people had become gutsy, and lost people had found a sure sense of direction. Disciples who had not believed themselves capable of tying their own sandals without Jesus discovered abilities within themselves they never knew they had. When they opened their mouths to speak, they sounded like Jesus. When they laid their hands upon the sick, it was as if Jesus himself had touched them. In short order, they were doing things they had never seen anyone but him do, and there was no explanation for it, except that they had dared to inhale on the day of Pentecost. They had sucked in God’s own breath and they had been transformed by it. The Holy Spirit had entered into them the same way it had entered into Mary, the mother of Jesus, and for the same reason. It was time for God to be born again – not in one body this time but in a body of believers who would receive the breath of life from their Lord and pass it on, using their own bodies to distribute the gift.

The book of Acts is the story of their adventures, which is why I like to think of it as the gospel of the Holy Spirit. In the first four books of the New Testament, we learn the good news of what God did through Jesus Christ. In the book of Acts, we learn the good news of what God did through the Holy Spirit, by performing artificial resuscitation on a room full of well-intentioned bumbling and turning them into a force that changed the history of the world.

The question for me is whether we still believe in a God who acts like that. Do we still believe in a God who blows through closed doors and sets our heads on fire? Do we still believe in a God with power to transform us, both as individuals and as a people, or have we come to an unspoken agreement that our God is pretty old and tired by now, someone to whom we may address our prayer requests but not anyone we really expect to change our lives?

Of all the persons of the Trinity, I suppose the Holy Spirit is the hardest to define. Most of us can at least begin to describe the other two: God the Father, creator of

heaven and earth, who makes the sun shine and the rain fall. God the Son, who was human like us: our savior, teacher, helper, and friend. But how would you describe God the Holy Spirit to a five-year-old child? Even Jesus had a hard time with that one. “The Spirit blows where it chooses,” he said in John’s gospel, “and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (3:8).

There is some very fine teaching available on the Holy Spirit; and I hope none of you is satisfied with it. I hope none of you rests until you have felt the Holy Spirit blow through your own life, rearranging things, opening things up and maybe even setting your own head on fire. There is nothing you can do to make it happen, as far as I know, except to pray “Come, Holy Spirit” every chance you get. If you don’t want anything to change in your life, then for heaven’s sake don’t pray that, but if you are the type of person who likes to stand out on the porch when there is a storm moving through so you can feel the power that is pushing the trees around, then you are probably a good candidate for the Holy Spirit prayer.

Asking for an experience of the Holy Spirit is only half the equation, however. The other half is recognizing it when it comes. On the whole, I find there are a lot of people in the world who say they have never encountered God as Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, but when they start talking about their lives it seems pretty clear to me they have. They just did not know what to call the experience. They did not have a name for it, so they wrote it off to coincidence or ESP or hormones. And maybe that is all it was for them. Each of us has the right to name our own experiences (or not). But just in case you have had some things happen to you that you do not have a name for, I want to suggest some ways I believe the Holy Spirit acts.

One famous way is to give people a sense of new beginning. Say you have been in a bad mood for the last year. It seems as if all you are doing is moving bricks from one pile to another – at work, at home, in your sleep – just moving bricks until you do not care whether it is day or night. Then one of those nights while you are lying awake in your bed, you hear one bird sing outside – just one. “Why is that bird singing in the middle of the night?” you wonder, and then you realize it is not the middle of the night anymore. It is the edge of morning. The bird chirps again and something inside of you softens. You take a deep breath for the first time in months and your chest opens up. You get a second wind.

You can call this anything you want. I call it an act of the Holy Spirit.

Another trademark of the Holy Spirit is to give people a way back into relationship. Maybe this has happened to you. You are estranged from someone you really care about – because of something you said or did or something the other person said or did – it really does not matter which. The point is, you are tired of it, so you start plotting ways to get through. You draft letters, rehearse

phone calls, only none of them sounds right. You are still hanging on to your hurt, or your anger, and it keeps leaking through. Then one day for no apparent reason something inside of you says, “Now.” You grab the phone, the person says, “Hello?” and the rest is history. Your heart opens and the right words come out. A reunion gets underway.

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These intimate encounters are so potent that it is easy to stop with them, but the truth is that the Holy Spirit can work with hundreds of people at the same time. I have seen it happen over and over again in large rooms full of people who have come together to make decisions or seek direction. One by one, they come into the room with their own agendas. Some of them come fearfully, ready to defend themselves. Then someone says a prayer, people begin to talk, and for no apparent reason positions begin to shift. People listen to each other and take each other seriously. They become creative together, coming up with ideas none of them had thought of on their own. It is as if a fresh wind blows through the room and clears everyone’s heads.

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Once you get the hang of it, the evidence is easier and easier to spot. Whenever two plus two does not equal four but five – whenever you find yourself speaking with eloquence you know you do not have, or offering forgiveness you had not meant to offer – whenever you find yourself taking risks you thought you did not have the courage to take or reaching out to someone you had intended to walk away from – you can be pretty sure that you are learning about the gospel of the Holy Spirit. And more than that, you are taking part in it, breathing in and breathing out, taking God into you and giving God back to the world again, with some of you attached.

Take a breath. Now just keep breathing. This is God’s moment-by-moment gift to us. We can call it air or we can call it Holy Spirit. It counts on us to warm it up, to lend it our lives. In return, it promises to fill us with new wind, to set our heads on fire, giving us tongues to speak of things we cannot begin to understand.

Do we still believe in a God who acts like that? More importantly, do we still *experience* a God who acts like that? I do not know what your answer is, but if you do not have one I hope you will discover one. Join the Gospel of the Holy Spirit Conspiracy and see what happens next.

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