

Romans 8:22-27; Acts 2:1-21; Pentecost B; 5/20/18
Pastor Ellen Schoepf

The Spirit is a-moving and the activity of the moving Spirit is dangerous indeed! Those who talk about wanting to feel God's "sweet, sweet spirit in this place," or those who say they are "spiritual but not religious" may need to question that thinking as we hear the words given to us today about the movement of the Spirit.

We tend to read a line like Romans 8:26 about the Spirit helping us "in our weakness," and think, "Oh, that is pleasant, so sweet." However, such thoughts of *pleasantness* fail to put that verse in its proper context, and we quickly forget the prevailing image Paul gives us in this passage from Romans is that of **childbirth** – "the whole creation has been groaning in **labor pains**." Now, any woman present in this gathering who has actively given birth can testify and bear witness to the fact that childbirth is neither a sweet process, nor is it a gentle, comfortable, pleasant process. And, I can imagine that there comes a point in almost every birthing **process** when every woman yearns, maybe even screams out, for help in her weakness, asking for something for the pain.

So, as we reflect upon St. Paul's words in his letter to the Romans, it is interesting that he uses the metaphor of giving birth as he talks about the

activity of the Spirit in the lives of believers as well as in all of creation. He writes, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.” Paul is referring to the fact that all of creation waits, along with all believers, for the fulfillment of God’s plan for the world, including our final adoption as the sons and daughters of God and the **full** redemption of creation. We wait, the process **is** happening, but it is an “already, not yet” process. It is not finished.

The groans of creation that Paul describes continue in our time and perhaps even increase as pollution, overpopulation, inequitable distribution of food and resources, and human induced climate change confront us. The groans of believers also continue as we await a consummation of faith. If we tried to put those groans into words, we can articulate quite a list just by looking at the news of this past week. We see horrific violence between Israel and Gaza, we have seen yet another mass school shooting, we see war waging around the world, global terrorism, sexual exploitation of women and children, modern-day slavery, oppressive regimes, drug and alcohol abuse, marital and family distress, incurable diseases, chaos, corruption, dysfunction and more. It is nearly impossible to articulate all the problems we come face to face with in this present world. And, yes, maybe the best we can do is **groan and sigh and hope**.

If this is where we find ourselves, if we find ourselves groaning and sighing and hoping, Paul's words to us today are assuring because he tells us **we are on the right track!** We **hope** for what we have been promised in faith, but we do not yet see. We pray, but often inarticulately, given the weight of our concerns. And, when concerns overwhelm us, the Spirit is there to carry our burdens **for** us, interceding with God on our behalf. The Spirit knows both what we need and what God's will is for us and this world. What the Spirit does for us today is to bring our concerns and the will of God into harmony. We may live in difficult times; nevertheless, God is guiding creation through the plethora of birth pains to a future fulfillment of promise.

Birth pains, groaning, the rush of a mighty wind and tongues as of fire. These images for the movement of the Spirit are not sweet, saccharine images. The bestowal of the Holy Spirit is **not** for the weak of heart. "Tongues as of fire," may mean speaking in unknown languages, but it more likely means being pushed out of our comfort zones to speak about Jesus **to** others in a "language" not our own, uncomfortably and fearfully learning to talk to people with whom we normally would not associate. And it might mean speaking truth to power, addressing issues and concerns some people would rather the church not talk about. The

Spirit might prompt you to say things that are so out there, so against the grain of what most people think and believe, that someone is likely to ask you, “What have you been smoking?” This is, of course, the 21st Century equivalent of accusing you of being drunk at 9 am.

Yes, this Holy Spirit business is a dangerous thing. Peter is quoting the prophet Joel when he talks about women and men prophesying, about the young seeing visions and the old dreaming dreams. We all know that visions and dreams and prophecies are dangerous things. They can in fact be frightening. They require risk. Far too often, we tend to think it is better that we stay safely rocking on the porch, watching God’s mighty wind blow on somebody else, somewhere else. But, here’s the catch – it **doesn’t** work to try to stay on the porch. What’s that old expression, “You can run, but you can’t hide.” The Spirit **will** find you, just like it found the apostles, huddled together in one place, behind four walls in a closed room. Yes, the Spirit will **find** you, and it will **fill** you, and it will **give** you a tongue as of fire, and it will **push** you out of your cozy chair and into a wild ride through the world. And really, all one can do is take a deep breath and hang on for dear life.

As I think about the movement of the Spirit in this place, I see it has been happening and it **is** happening. The Spirit has moved us beyond our

comfort zones and off our porches to become a Reconciling In Christ congregation. That Spirit will be seen as members of this congregation walk in the Pride Parade in June, carrying a Faith Lutheran Church banner and handing out “Martin Wufer” dog biscuits to the dogs along the parade route. The Spirit has been moving us beyond our comfort zones and off our porches to create a Green Team and encourage all of us to address the groaning of creation by becoming good **stewards** of creation. The Spirit has been moving us beyond our comfort zones and off our porches as we have created an Annual Community Picnic through which we attempt to connect to the greater community, offering our neighbors the gift of food, music, activity and presence. The Spirit has been moving us beyond our comfort zones and off our porches as we continue to fill the food bank we have created in the office of the apartments across the street. And, the Spirit has been moving in **this** place as we have fixed up the old parsonage and are taking in these unaccompanied immigrant kids. With this project, every hurdle that has appeared before us has been obliterated and it is truly a God/Spirit thing. People from various churches and faiths have come together to support this effort. When we take time to think about what has happened in just a few short months, we can see the movement

of the Spirit at work in this place, moving us beyond our comfort zones and off of our cozy porches to truly care for **all** others.

Oh, yes, the Spirit is moving in this place and it is a dangerous thing. All creation is groaning with labor pains and the wind of the Spirit is blowing. Yes, the Spirit is moving, and it is a radical, mysterious and dangerous thing because the Spirit is always at work forming us into the Body of Christ for the sake of the **world**. And, the Spirit is always at work giving birth, giving birth to something new through the Body of Christ. So, watch out, because you **cannot** sit on the sidelines when the Spirit of God is at work!