

Breath for the Body

A sermon by Jim Somerville, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Richmond, Va., May 19, 2013

The Day of Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21

Last Sunday Lee Hilbert surprised me by coming forward at the end of the 8:30 service and asking if he could make an announcement. I was a little disappointed. I had thought that maybe, just maybe, he was coming to rededicate his life to Christ or volunteer for the foreign mission field. But then I remembered: Lee is chair of our personnel team. That's about as dedicated as you can get and, in its own way, it is a mission. So I let him make an announcement and he surprised me again by recognizing my fifth anniversary as your pastor. He said some very nice things that he really didn't have to say, and you got to your feet and applauded, which you really didn't have to do. I was moved, and at the 8:30 service had some trouble saying thank you because of the lump in my throat and so, once again, thank you, thank you, thank you.

It is a joy and a privilege to be your pastor.

If I'm remembering correctly my first Sunday with you was on Mother's Day, 2008, but it was also the Day of Pentecost. I tried to combine those two things creatively by preaching a sermon called, "Who Gave Birth to the Church?" But today we don't have that problem; we can focus on Pentecost exclusively. We can sing the hymns and read the Scriptures and remember what happened on that first Pentecost, when 120 believers were gathered in an upper room, and suddenly there was a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, and tongues of flame appeared above the believers' heads, and they began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them the ability. We read that passage and tell that story on this day just as we read the passage about Jesus' birth on Christmas or tell the story of his resurrection on Easter. But we also want to know "so what?" What does this thing that happened to those people all those years ago have to do with us who live here, now, in 21st century America? This is a story about the birth of the church, about how it came into the world like most babies come into the world—with a good bit of noise and commotion—but also how, when it sucked

that first breath into its lungs, it sucked in the breath of the Holy Spirit.

But that was 2,000 years ago, and according to some observers the church in America, at least, is now gasping for breath. It's gotten old, and tired; there's not much life left in it. The Greatest Generation—which has always been so good about coming to church, and giving, and serving—is dying off and the younger generations don't seem to have nearly as much interest. I've heard from some of my colleagues lately that they are having to come up with new ways to measure attendance. For example, they might average 750 people in Sunday school from week to week but discover that there are 1,000 people who come at least once a month. Another church might average 500 people in Sunday school but discover that there are still 1,000 people who come at least once a month. So you have 1,000 people in both churches who consider themselves regular attenders, but some come three times a month and some come only twice. I would guess there are some who come even less than that and still consider themselves regular attenders.

But let's not judge. I've talked to people who tell me why they can't come every Sunday, and some of their reasons are good ones. They're taking their kids to college, or caring for aging parents in another state. Not to mention that the 40-hour work week seems to be a thing of the past. Many of these are couples where both spouses work, where they come home exhausted after putting in full days on the road or at the office. Maybe one of them will think to pick up some Chinese takeout on the way home or they will simply order a pizza. And even when they're home they're not resting. They are taking their kids to soccer, helping them with homework, doing laundry, paying bills, and checking email before finally falling into bed so they can get up and do it all over again. I'm just guessing that when Sunday morning rolls around there are not too many of them who say, "Yay, let's get up and get dressed and go to church!" And then they get here, and instead of giving them an encouraging pat on the back the pastor tells them to get out there and bring the Kingdom of Heaven to Richmond, Virginia.

And then there are the younger generations, which seem to be looking for almost any excuse to stay out of the church. In a book called *unChristian* David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons claim that the younger generations think of Christians as "hypocritical, homophobic, old-fashioned, out-of-touch, too focused on making converts, too political, and too judgmental."^[i] These young people might describe themselves as "spiritual, but not religious," and they certainly don't have

much interest in organized religion, where somebody is going to stand in a pulpit and tell them what to do, or what not to do. Why would they want to go to a place like that? This is one of the reasons Sunday morning worship attendance in America has been falling off at such an alarming rate: the older, churchgoing generations are dying off and the younger generations don't go to church. But maybe that's where we can find some good news in the story of Pentecost, because it's not so much about going to church as it is about being the church.

I told someone last week I have a vision of this room packed with people Sunday after Sunday, joyfully worshiping God; the offering plates overflowing with generous expressions of their love; Sunday school classes filled with people, eagerly studying God's word, hallways jammed with friends who are talking and laughing and hugging each other. "It's not just out there in Richmond that I want the Kingdom to come," I said; "I want it to come here, too, at First Baptist Church." And immediately we began to brainstorm about what we might do to make that vision a reality. But then I went to my study to work on the sermon, I opened my Bible to the first few pages of Acts, and this is what I found: Jesus, telling his disciples that they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, but not until they receive power from on high. "He ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem," Luke says, "but to wait for the promise from the Father" (Acts 1:4).

He seems to be saying, "Don't try to do anything on your own. You would only mess it up. So, don't go rushing off to the ends of the earth under your own power. Stay in Jerusalem. Wait for the power from on high." I think there's a lesson for us in that. Do you know how it is when we decide that we want to reach the world for Christ, or even when we want to increase church attendance by 10 percent? We start making plans, devising strategies. But Jesus, who had just told his disciples that he wanted them to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth, said, "Don't do that. Don't make plans. Don't devise strategies. Stay. Wait." And to their credit, that's exactly what they did.

After Jesus had said his goodbyes there on the Mount of Olives, blessed them, and ascended into heaven, they went back to Jerusalem. "And when they had entered [the city]," Luke says, "they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the Son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together

with Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” (Acts 1:12-14). Luke tells us later that there were even more than these—about 120 altogether—and if you count the days between the Ascension and Pentecost you realize that they must have been crammed into that upper room for ten days, waiting and praying for the promised power from on high, and if you’ve ever been anywhere with that many people for ten days you can imagine what it was like. I once spent the night in a homeless shelter, and I can imagine it was something like that, with people sleeping practically shoulder to shoulder, stinking and snoring.

But on the day of Pentecost a breath of fresh air blew through the place, with a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled the entire room where they were gathered. And something like flames appeared over their heads and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in strange, unknown tongues. But as it turns out those tongues were known to the people who had come to Jerusalem from every part of the ancient world, and who came running when they heard all the commotion from that upper room. They heard these uneducated Galileans speaking their own languages, and telling them about the mighty works of God. But others mocked those Galileans, made fun of them, and said they were drunk.

That’s when Peter stood up and said, “No, these people aren’t drunk. They’re full of the Holy Spirit! This is just what the prophet Joel was talking about when he said that in the last days ‘God will pour out his spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.’ That’s what’s happening. These are the last days.” And that’s when the crowd asked him, “Then, what must we do to be saved?” And Peter said, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ!” We usually remember that part. And we remember that 3,000 people were added to the church that day. But we sometimes forget what Peter said next: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord God calls to himself” (Acts 2:38-39). In other words, we seem to miss the truth that this promise is for us, that we, too, can receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, the promised power from on high.

On the day the church was born it sucked the breath of the Holy Spirit into its lungs, and it went forward on that power for days, for years, for centuries. But

these days the church—in America at least—seems to be gasping for breath. It needs something, but we're not sure what it is. And so we try to bring it back to life again through contemporary worship, contemplative prayer, Evangelism Explosion, a focus on peace and justice, when maybe what we need to do most is listen to Jesus. "Wait," he says. "Pray. Ask my father to send the promised power from on high." Because Peter said this promise was not only for those people who were there on the Day of Pentecost, but for their children, and for those who are far off, and everyone whom the Lord God calls to himself. And that would include us, wouldn't it?

This may be the good news of this passage: that the promise is for us—the promised power from on high—that it could enter even the church in America as breath enters the body, and give it life, and make it strong. Imagine our twenty and thirty-somethings seeing visions of the church's future, and members of the Greatest Generation dreaming dreams of what yet might be. Imagine those people in between who are so exhausted and distracted, being filled with the Holy Spirit and using that burst of energy to change the world. The secret of the church's success is not some human plan or strategy. It's the Spirit of God, first given to his people on the Day of Pentecost, but given to his people in every generation since. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord (Zech. 4:6). That's how the church will succeed: by the Spirit of God, the breath of the Body of Christ. How do we get that spirit? First, we recognize our need, and then we ask the only one who can give it. Jesus once said, "What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" (Luke 11:11-13). And so, let's ask.

Shall we pray?

Father in heaven: if we asked for a fish would you give us a serpent? If we asked for an egg would you give us a scorpion? Here we are, asking for your Holy Spirit, knowing that it is as necessary to the life of the church as breath is necessary to the life of the body. Give it to us, as we wait and pray, in the name of the one who told us to ask. Amen.

[i] David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), pp. 29-30.