“With You From The Beginning”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

May 24, 2015

From the Pulpit
The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215
Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741
Email: home@first-church.org
Website: http://www.first-church.org
A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost Sunday, May 24, 2015 dedicated to the memory of Chuck Kelley and Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson and always to the glory of God!

“With You From The Beginning”

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

“Did you know the word “Conspire” means to breathe together? Today, let us conspire… Everyone, take a breath together. Breathe in. Breathe out.

There you go! We have just launched a conspiracy! I love it!

You can hear the word “spirit” in there – to conspire – to be filled with the same spirit, to be enlivened by the same

*When we come together and breathe together to worship God, the Holy Spirit swoops in and out among us, knitting us together through the songs we sing, through the prayers we pray and through the breaths we breathe. It can happen with two people and it can happen with three thousand people. It can scare us or comfort us, confuse 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* (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 1999, p. 142).

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. We have no cosmic cleaning company which comes along every hundred years or so to suck out 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 Tyrannosaurus Rex breath and pterodactyl breath. We breathe air that circulated through the rainforests of Kenya and Brazil and air that has turned yellow in the smog over Los Angeles. We breathe the same air as Plato and Buddha and Jesus and Mozart and Michelangelo and JS Bach (and all the other Bachs) not to mention the same air as Bin Laden and Hitler. Every time we breathe we take in some baby’s first breath of life (like Wesley David who was born this week) or some beloved one’s last breath of life (like Chuck Kelley). We take it in, **we use it to live** and we breathe it out and it carries some of us with it to someone else, or some tree or some manatee that uses it to live. It is air. It is breath. It is spirit! (drawn from *Ibid*, p. 143).

When Jesus let go of his last breath – for the love of each one of us – that breath hung in the air in front of him for a moment and then was set loose on earth. It was a breath so full of passion, so full of life, so full of love that is did not simply dissipate as so many breaths do (*Ibid*). It grew in strength and volume until it became a mighty wind 53 days later and swept through an upper room where disciples were gathered and blew through the thousands who were in the streets of Jerusalem celebrating the giving of the law at Shavuot. This mighty wind burst into tongues of fire,
breathed “Ruach” or “Spirit” into people so that when they spoke their words came out in languages they had never heard or spoken – but understood.

Like thousands of pipes on the Beckerath and Kimball organs being opened and played all at the same time, it was a Holy Racket of voices, languages, and sound coming together simultaneously. They were from all over the Middle East. They were all carrying on about God’s mighty deeds of power like they were at a PhD convention in Middle Eastern Languages (Acts 2:8-10) – but they understood each other! In this moment in time, the Story of the Tower of Babel was reversed! While the ancient story spoke of separating people through language, our Pentecost story brought everyone back together again – through the power of God’s spirit speaking in differing languages! Very Cool!

By the end of the day of Pentecost the church had grown from a small church of 120 people to a mega-church of more than 3,000 people. Shy people became bold people, scared people became gutsy people, and lost people found a sense of purpose and direction. Disciples who had been in hiding and couldn’t even tie their own sandals because they were shaking so badly were out in the open marketplace
declaring Jesus Christ as Lord! They even started talking like him and acting like him – preaching, teaching and healing people in his name. They had sucked in the breath of God and been transformed by it. They had become a conspiracy of Good News people in the heart of Jerusalem (drawn from *Ibid*).

The Holy Spirit had blown through them the same way the Spirit moved into Mary, the mother of Jesus, and for the same reason. It was time for God to be born again! This time God’s birth came not in one body but in a whole body of believers who were charged with passing on God’s Spirit as the great distribution of Believers, known to us now as “Little Christs!” or “Christians.”

The “Little Christs” adventures are chronicled in the Book of Acts – which should really be renamed “The Gospel of the Holy Spirit.” Everywhere they went these previously described bumbling buffoons (if you don’t believe me read The Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John) went around turning the world upside down! They carried Jesus with them everywhere they went. Through their second birth, they became Christ in the world – alive and loose and free!
My question is – do you believe this story?

When you breathe in and breathe out, are you feeling any connection to the Spirit’s Conspiracy of Love and Justice unleashed in the world thousands of years ago or do you feel nothing at all? Do you feel anything in your bones, in your body, in your soul, in your faith, in your heart connected to the breath of God loose and free in the world which we call the Holy Spirit?

If you don’t feel moved by this story of Wind and Fire and Spirit, then let’s go back to Jesus’ OWN words in John’s Gospel. First and most importantly, he tells the disciples, “The Spirit has been with us from the beginning.” Before his birth in Bethlehem there was Spirit! Before his life in the Galilee – Spirit. Before his baptism in the Jordan – Spirit. Before all his teaching, preaching and healing – the Spirit was there! Before he was crucified, dead, buried and risen – Spirit!

From the beginning of time itself, the Spirit has been with us!

Jesus clearly delineates all the names and powers of the Holy Spirit in John 14, 15 and 16. Jesus calls the Holy
Spirit the Comforter, the Advocate, the Helper, the Teacher, the Friend of All! In today’s passage in John 15 and 16 Jesus tells the disciples that the Spirit will bear witness to the world (15:26-27) and the Spirit will convict the world in the case about sin and justice and judgment (John 16:7-11). And finally the Spirit will lead the church into all truth and declare the things that are yet to come (16:12-15). In other words, it is the Holy Spirit which keeps alive the voice and breath of Jesus living in the voice and breath of the church!

I see the Holy Spirit as God’s way of giving us new beginnings. Say you are having a bad mood for the last year or so. It seems like you are just moving the piles of manure from one location to another. Then early one morning, you hear the sound of a bird chirping in the dark. You think to yourself, birds don’t chirp in the dark and you awaken enough to realize the dawn is breaking. Something in you softens. You take a deep breath and you catch a second wind. You may call this something else, but I call it the Holy Spirit (drawn from *Ibid*, p. 146).

The Holy Spirit also helps us back into relationships. Perhaps this has happened to you. You are estranged from someone you really care about. You have drafted letters,
Facebook, emails, texts and phone messages in your head trying to reconnect. But, you don’t press “send” and you don’t pick up the phone to call. Then all of the sudden, something grabs your heart and says “NOW.” You pick up the phone and call (hoping inside yourself that it goes to voicemail) and the person answers with “Hello, I am really missed you.” A reunion begins. Whatever you call it, I call it the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit has such power to connect us with people hundreds of times each day. Our long range planning committee is asking you to share your vision for the church directed toward the plan we are already calling 20/20. They are like the Holy Spirit Power Cord trying to plug you in to a positive, vibrant, active, delightful, spiritual future here at First Church. If you don’t plug in there will be no power source for future designs and vision for our church… You may call it church planning. I call it the Holy Spirit!

Call upon the Holy Spirit and great things will happen! Get plugged in!

Again I ask, “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?” If you don’t then the foundation of your belief in Jesus and his
Church crumbles and collapses in on itself like a house of cards – especially since the Spirit precedes Jesus according to own words!

Recently, I asked a Pentecostal friend if his church has a huge service for Pentecost Sunday. He said, “No, not really – because we believe every Sunday is Pentecost Sunday. We believe every Sunday, the Holy Spirit comes by here to dance, sing, breathe and empower us for love and justice in the world! We leave each Sunday filled with the Holy Spirit and ready to take on the world all over again!” Now that is how all us should be – Spirit fed and led!

Take a breath. Now, keep breathing. This is God’s moment to moment gift to us. We can call it air or we can call it the Holy Spirit! If it is air, we will simply continue moving and breathing the same as before. If it is the Holy Spirit, we will be warmed, changed, and caught on fire! I invite you this Pentecost to join the Holy Spirit Conspiracy and see what happens Next! Come Holy Spirit – Empower us for LIFE! Amen.

Copyright 2015, First Congregational Church, UCC