
Pentecost
Chapel in the Park United Church
June 8, 2025
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Genesis 11:1-9 and John 14:8-17, 25-27

Welcome to pentecost! Given the scripture readings for today, you might think I forgot all about pentecost. But trust me - the readings were definitely about pentecost. And if you don't agree at the end of this reflection, well, we definitely have some solid pentecost hymns today.

To be fair, in our reading from John it is only the last paragraph that gives a nod to pentecost. Jesus said, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

In John, Jesus describes his coming departure. And the later sending of the spirit to all people. You might think that pentecost is about wind and fire. If so, you are thinking of the version of the story found in Acts. But in John, pentecost is only about the spirit. That is what mattered to John. That is what still matters today.

In the Bible the presence of God is often depicted as wind or as fire. In both biblical Hebrew and biblical Greek the word that means "wind" also means "spirit".

[image: pneuma]

The word in biblical greek is "pneuma". From which we get words like pneumatic. So what really happened at pentecost? What happened was something that was hard to put into words. And so, the biblical authors used the word "pneuma" to describe something they could not see. But something that they could sense. Something that they could feel.

According to theologian Marcus Borg, we need to understand pentecost in relation to the story of the tower of Babel. Which is why we read that story from Genesis

this morning.

[image: speaking christian]

In his book, “Speaking Christian”, Borg says, “The echoing of Babel in [the] story of Pentecost has a powerful metaphorical meaning. Pentecost is the reversal of Babel. What happened at Babel confused the world by dividing it into separate languages and countries. This resulted in misunderstandings, rivalries, and conflict. Pentecost is the beginning of the reunification of humanity.”

Of course it depends a bit on how we hear the story of the tower of Babel. To me it always reads like a reverse wedding. At a wedding the minister says, “what God has joined together let no-one rend asunder”. But with the tower of Babel story it is more like “what people have joined together, let God rend asunder.” It’s the opposite of a wedding. It’s a shotgun divorce. Borg’s idea is that pentecost is a bringing together of the people that God “rent asunder” earlier. The divorce that God inflicted on the world’s people has been remedied by pentecost - where the spirit became present to all the peoples of the world.

It is an interesting idea. The idea that pentecost was about restoring a balance from a previous time in history. Accomplished by the spirit engaging with all of humanity. All humanity. Not just a little group of “special people” - which is how the mythical stories in the Old Testament describe the spirit - for example, speaking only to individuals like Noah and Moses.

The spirit is for everyone. The spirit that comes at pentecost is not Christian, or Jewish. The spirit does not belong to any religion. The spirit is the spirit of the God who created all human beings.

The hymn following this sermon references Babel, and I hope this explanation makes the hymn more meaningful.

[image: wind]

In any case, wind is a popular image for pentecost. For one thing, we all know what wind is. We all know the power of wind. Think about a cyclone. Think about all of that transformative power focused in one spot. Does that remind you of anything? No, I am not still thinking about pentecost. I am thinking of the movie, “The Wizard of Oz.”.

[image: wizard of oz movie]

For the Wizard of Oz movie to make sense, we need to remember that movies used to be filmed in Black and White, not colour. The first colour movie was a French film called

[image: a trip to the moon]

“A Trip to the Moon” from 1902. But due to costs and other factors that are likely only interesting to me, colour movies did not become common until decades later. The 1939 movie, the Wizard of Oz did something very provocative. The movie started in black and white, switched to colour in the middle, and switched back to black and white at the end. And that colour-switching coincided with the whole point of the story. And with pentecost, but I’m getting ahead of myself.

[image: dorothy in bw]

The movie is about a young girl, Dorothy, and her dog, Toto. When the story begins, life for Dorothy was “normal”, and not particularly happy. Life was I suppose adequate for a young girl living on a farm in Kansas at the time. But she was bored with her life and was running away from home. You could say that her life lacked colour.

[image: cyclone]

But then the wind came. The wind picked up Dorothy, Toto, her house, [image: cranky neighbour] her cranky neighbour and others. And took them all to a place where everything was different.

[image: dorothy with the munchkins]

A place of colour. A place where nothing was normal. At least not unless your “normal” includes little people who spend their time dancing and singing, and monkeys fly.

[image: dorothy and friends]

Dorothy also found new friends. Friends with unexplainable gifts. The gifts of courage, compassion, and wisdom. The friends journey together, and eventually,

[image: emerald city]

discover a magical place. Emerald City - full of beauty and full of promise and

opportunity. Full of colour.

[image: dorothy and glinda]

Dorothy also met Glinda the Good, who told Dorothy that the love she was looking for was always and already inside Dorothy. To get home, Dorothy just had to decide to go home.

[image: dorothy home]

At the end of the movie, Dorothy and Toto return home to Kansas and everything went back to “normal”. But somehow, something had changed. Visually, nothing had changed. Back to the farm. Back to black and white. And yet, something had changed. Dorothy’s home had become a loved and special place. What had actually changed? Nothing external changed. Only Dorothy’s attitude had changed.

[image: wind turbines]

Dorothy’s soul had been made light by the wind of the cyclone. The wind changed nothing. And yet the wind allowed everything to change. That sounds like pentecost to me! That spirit that comes out of nowhere, take us to places unknown, and then returns us to see our own world with new eyes and a new heart. The spirit that helps us to change our attitudes. Our physical reality may or may not change, but our attitudes can always change. That’s what pentecost is all about.

Pentecost has never been about the wind and the fire. It has always been about the spirit. The spirit that allows us to open ourselves to change and new life. Dorothy’s story in the Wizard of Oz is a pentecost story. I wonder how open we are to that sort of transformation ourselves? Are we willing to let the spirit take us to places unknown, and then return us to see our own world with new eyes and a new heart? Do not make me get my flying monkeys!

[image: chocolat]

I’m also reminded of the 2000 movie, “chocolat”. That film is about a chocolate-maker and her young daughter. They move to a small french village in 1959 and set up a chocolate shop. The town is small enough that it takes awhile for strangers to be accepted. But through patience and perseverance, Vianne and her daughter Anouk do make friends with the people of the village. This transformation happens mainly because

Vianne is so friendly herself, and because she has such a hopeful nature. The fact that Vianne gives the villagers chocolate might have helped too.

[image: vianne listening]

But the main reason the villagers accept Vianne is that Vianne actually listens to them. She does not judge them, she simply gets to know them. And she supports them in their day-to-day struggles. And as Vianne listens to the villagers, as they tell her their own life stories - they are changed. One woman, for example, had been the victim of domestic abuse from her alcoholic husband. She moved in with Vianna and learned all about chocolate making. And as she learns, she gains new self-awareness and new self-confidence. What she actually gains is nothing less than new life. And by the end of the movie, many people in the village has at least some experience of “new life”, thanks to the pastoral presence of Vianne. Pentecost comes with wind. But it can also come with chocolate. Who knew?

[image: chocolat mayor negative]

It sounds very simple if I tell the story that way. But there are a few complications. The village is a place where tradition reigns above everything else. Where people do what they have always done. Where people do what their parents did. Where people do what their grand-parents did. It is therefore a village of order, of calm, of known expectations. It is a place where people enjoy tranquility more than change and drama. It is a place where everyone even goes to the same church - and they go every week. It is a place where knowing your place in society is more important than ... well ... more important than anything else.

[image: chocolat chocolaterie]

So in fact, Vianne and Anouk have problems integrating with the community because they do not share those traditions. Vianne opens her chocolate shop during Lent - at a time when the villagers were expected to avoid all pleasures. Moreover, Vianne wears somewhat provocative clothing. She does not go to church. She has a child that some people call “illegitimate”. She does not naturally fit into a town that observes and honours traditional values and ways. Consequently, the mayor starts a crusade against Vianne and her delicious chocolates. And initially, most of the town’s people support the

mayor.

In other words, when Vianne and Anouk arrive, they are clearly not welcome. They upset people. Not so much because of their actions, but because of their presence. Because of what people think they represent.

And Vianne decides to move on to another village - as she has done many times during her life. But the villagers rally behind her and help her create a chocolate festival for Easter Sunday. The mayor - who is still against Vianne - breaks into the chocolate shop to destroy the display.

[image: chocolate mayor indulging]

And in the process a small piece of chocolate lands on his lip - and he unwittingly tastes it. And he finally breaks down and sees the great gift of Vianne and her chocolate. Then he sort of eats the entire chocolate display.

[image: wind]

The movie invites us to consider the question - is Vianne a much needed breath of fresh air? Or is she a threat to everything that the village holds dear? Or perhaps, she is both. Vianne is certainly a “breath”, a pneuma, of some sort. Or perhaps a wind. Or perhaps even a cyclone. In the earliest scene in the movie where we meet Vianne and Anouk, we see them being literally blown into town by a strong wind. It is almost as if they are being forced into the village against their wishes. And at the exact same time, the massive doors on the church blow open during a worship service. And the mayor himself gets up to bolt the doors shut. To shut out the wind that is bringing Vianne and new life into the village. The church doors are closed to keep the winds of pentecost out. But pentecost came to the village in spite of the doors being locked.

[image: pentecost]

And so on Pentecost - we each face the same question. Is the spirit that we feel like a breath of fresh air? Or is the spirit that we feel more like a threat to our stability Or is it both. Is the spirit both comforting and challenging? Is it upholding and threatening to our way of life. If it feels like both, then it probably is the spirit! And just as for Dorothy, and for the villagers, we too are invited to embrace the spirit of pentecost. To open ourselves to new possibilities.

Or perhaps we - like the mayor - have tried to shut the church doors to keep the spirit of pentecost out. Perhaps we - at least sometimes - have tried to hold back the winds of change in our personal lives. But I'll tell you a secret. These winds are here. We can shut the doors if we like, but the winds of the spirit are here. Pentecost is here.

That spirit that comes out of nowhere, take us to places unknown, and then returns us to see our own world with new eyes and new hearts. The spirit that helps us to change our attitudes. Our physical reality may or may not change, but our attitudes can always change. That is what pentecost is all about.

I know - it is natural to reject the spirit of pentecost. Let's face it. We live in a noisy world. A world full of competing voices, strong opinions, and endless distractions. It's easy to feel overwhelmed. Easy to feel like we are pulled in too many directions. And in all the noise, it's tempting to long for a return to simpler times. A time when life was more black and white. A time when traditions dictated many aspects of our lives.

But pentecost reminds us that the spirit does not return us to the past. The spirit moves us forward into our future. Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, or the villagers in Chocolat, we return home with new eyes, a deeper and perhaps a softer heart, and a fuller understanding of what "love" really means. We do not come back from journeys unchanged. The spirit opens us to the richness and complexity of life - not to confuse us, but to teach us how to listen. How to love. How to live life in full colour.

May pentecost awaken in us the courage to live that way - open, curious, and grounded in peace and love for all people.

Welcome to pentecost!

Amen.