

**A Spirited People**  
**May 11, 2008**  
**A sermon by Joe Hoffman**

Twelve years ago I stood in the pulpit of a small congregation over on Merrimon Avenue to begin my time as the pastor of First Congregational UCC. It was my first time to be a solo pastor. I had worked for years on church staffs. It is nice to be on a staff and know that someone other than yourself is in charge. So I felt the weight of that moment. I knew I didn't know what I was doing – and wondered if those in the congregation knew as well. But I was there because I had felt called to be there. So we began this journey on Pentecost together – wondering where it would lead. I used as the call to worship that day words that we have used over and over again through these 12 years – I asked: How do we know that God is with us? We know, because we will be led to places we never intended to go! And look where we have gone.

That is the spirit of Pentecost. To open ourselves to God's power to take us wherever God would have us go. Those early disciples were locked up in a room, waiting and praying for God to give them the courage to be the church in the world. They had no idea what that would look like. But because of Easter, they had learned that God has a power like no other power in all the world. They trusted that God would empower them to live the promise of hope that Jesus had lived with them. They trusted that they were not alone.

But they never knew where the Spirit would lead them. But on that first Pentecost, the Spirit blew open the doors and those early followers spilled out into the streets of Jerusalem where a public festival was taking place. They quickly learned that they were to be a public church, a people that did not hide away in safety but boldly called forth the world that God imagined. A world built not on consumerism or military might, but on the Spirit of God's love and grace. A world where each and every person was respected and empowered to be who God had created them to be.

A few years into my ministry here, we had a Sunday morning in which about 12 people were going to join. Somehow people had discovered this little congregation of people, and they had begun to come and our church was growing. But on this Sunday it suddenly became clear that we were doing church differently from many of the churches around us. We had not had a meeting to decide to be a different sort of church. We just opened ourselves to God's spirit and found ourselves in moments and places we had not imagined or intended. On this particular day, we had two inter-racial families joining the church, and the first openly lesbian couple. I don't know what Sunday in the year it was, but it was Pentecost you see. We had allowed the Spirit to break open the doors that had kept us divided and separated – and we were watching as this Spirit really changed the make up and the role of this congregation in the city.

I remember Michael Hester, chair of the deacons at the time, who called me on Saturday night and said – let's touch base about tomorrow. Let's name to each other that this is a wonderful and different moment for this church. I appreciated his call. I appreciated his wisdom in knowing that it was important to name the change, to embrace it, to learn from it. I will always remember that moment. It really stuck out in my mind.

Pentecost is a moment in which old understandings are let loose and old ways of doing things are set free and allowed to be transformed. At Pentecost Jesus is made available to all people – no matter who we are and where we are. We are touched by the Spirit in a way that makes sense to us in our own language, in our own experience. We no longer hold onto fear but embrace God leading us forth to bring a word of hope to a world that longs for some good news. To bring a touch of grace to a world hurting from the pain of so much woundedness. Pentecost takes us to places we never intended to go!

What happens when the Spirit comes into our lives? What I see in this story is that the power of God is let loose in the public. It is not a private experience. The good news cannot be contained by our walls of prejudice or ignorance. The good news spills out into the streets and we find ourselves in the company of strangers, to use Parker Palmer's phrase. The Spirit of God does not call us to hold the good news in comfortable settings with people that are just like us, but to experience the power of this good news in all its diversity and difference. It is not a private religious experience that we keep in a closet, but a groundbreaking, earth shattering transformation that takes the church into the public square to live our faith in the midst of all that is happening around us. We cannot help but speak boldly and with such energy that those around us might ask – what has gotten into these people?

I have seen people get filled with spirit and drunk with some notion of God – and they go to the streets and encourage people to be like them. To come to their church. To hate what they hate. To build walls as they have built walls. That is not what I am talking about. I am talking about meeting people where they are, loving them as they are, and joining with them in the living of God's all embracing love. It is about being vulnerable to God's spirit in all its voices, in all its expressions, in all its cultural and racial and sexual diversity. Pentecost is a moment in which we are broken free of our carefully created boxes and we live openly and joyfully in the presence of one another. Pentecost is a gift to be received.

Pentecost is about understanding. But it is an interesting kind of understanding. I think it is about understanding what we cannot understand. In other words, we will never be

able to talk about this faith experience in ways that satisfy our longing for rational, logical, scientific reasoning. But we will understand that whatever it is that is happening, it is the work of the great mystery that is beyond our fully knowing – and yet in our being. It is the essence of who we are. We live in the trust that God joins us in our lives. We trust the promise that God can and will do what we cannot do on our own. We choose to live out of the story – not out of the modern day wisdom of our culture of consumerism, of taking care of self before helping our neighbor, of getting what is rightfully ours because of our privilege and the stories that teach us to hold onto that privilege. No. Pentecost gives us a new story that transforms us from the inside out. This story calls us to trust in a spirit that shakes the ground we walk on. Always calling forth something new.

Twelve years ago I hoped this congregation would grow and find its way into a new purpose for being. That was my prayer. I had no idea what that would look like. I had no idea how we would get there. I only knew that I felt called to be here, that this congregation had felt called to have me here, and that together we could trust God to lead us. Unfortunately, God does not write out the plans and make it clear. We had to get to know each other, we had to tell our stories, we had to argue some, we had to work through conflict about the place of the American flag in the sanctuary, we disagreed on the death penalty, we marched in the gay rights parade, we hosted a block party with our neighbors. We were actively waiting and praying for God to show us a way. Waiting even as we made decisions and took actions. People came and went. At times we had plans that we thought would be The Plan – but it never was. We still haven't found The Plan – but look where God has led us. Out of a small sanctuary on the edge of the city into a large building in the middle of the city. Out of a quiet existence into a bigger role in the public conversation and action of Asheville. Out of our past and into the continued uncertainty of our future.

We are beginning a strategic planning process that you will hear more about soon. It is our hope to create a plan that is based on a vision of what we discern God is calling us to be and do now and into the next 5 years. Whatever we come up with will, I pray, be a faithful plan. But it will not be The Plan. It will not work out exactly as we might hope it will. That level of certainty is elusive when God's spirit moves as it does. So my prayer is this. God, come and move among us. Show us your way. And blow the doors of our minds open to see and embrace the world you imagine.

The search committee is hard at work in hiring a full time associate pastor. It is a very good committee, and I want you to know that. I also know that many of us are anxious. It is another change. We aren't sure we like this process or want any change. But here we are. And this is what I want to ask you. I want to ask you to pray for this committee. I want you to pray that God will open us to God's way for us. That is different

than praying for a particular outcome. To ask God to show us a way means we trust God to show us a way – not our way, but God’s way.

That is a Pentecost Spirit. Where we trust God to open the doors that we can’t seem to find the handles too anymore and to lead us where we can’t imagine going. That is how we got where we are today in this church. Because I was telling the truth when I said twelve years ago I stood in front of this congregation not knowing what to do. I didn’t and I still don’t. They don’t teach this in seminary. But this is what I understand. God is with us. We are not alone. We can trust the promise. We can trust that God can take our differences and create us anew. We can trust that God can transform us, can give us the courage to take on our fears, can take us into the streets where we can work for justice for all in the public. Where we can be God’s channel of grace and mercy to those who are eager to find wholeness.

On this Mother’s Day, I remember a time when my mom seemed to know what I needed most. I was a young adult having some trouble finding my way. I had moved back home, back to my home church, back to what I had known and thought to be solid ground and truth. I needed God to be safe and easy to find. In the midst of that struggle, my mom gave me a poster. You have probably seen it somewhere along the way. But for me, at that time, it was new. And the words on the poster said – a ship in a harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for.

The church is not built to play it safe, to live on the old time religion. We are called to be the church in our day and time. On Pentecost we celebrate being the church. Let’s really be that church. Let’s not be afraid. Let’s take on the challenge. Let’s see what God yet can do with us. I call us today to that task. To that opportunity. To that responsibility. Pray with me that God blow the doors open and we will find ourselves yet again in places we didn’t intend to go, and with people we didn’t know we could even be church with. Isn’t that what it means to be a spirited people? Isn’t that what it means to live the story of Pentecost today?