

I think we've all heard Annie Dillard's take on the classic Sunday morning worship service, but here it is again:

*"On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, making up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' hats and straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and ... draw us out to where we can never return." Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk, p.40.*

She is pointing out that we come together to recognize and worship the very Spirit that lies behind all of creation, that gives us each breath we draw, without whose energy the sun would collapse and our lives would evaporate like fog under a bright sky. Yet we comport ourselves as if at the inauguration of a new county office, or the reception for a minor diplomat. Well, not always here—but I think it's fair to say that we gather with a relative sense of safety and expectation of predictability. But here on Pentecost, by golly, the holy scriptures remind us that our expectations rest on paper-thin foundations!

The Jewish festival of Pentecost was a spring harvest festival as well as the occasion on which they celebrated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. On that occasion there had been wind and fire, and now today there is wind and fire again as Jews from all over the known world gather. The disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit and begin to speak in all the languages of the people who are present.

Aside from the cynics who attribute this to strong drink, everyone else is just astonished. And what they're astonished *at*, I think, is not a mysterious or puzzling

message, but the fact that God is giving it to *them*. The disciples are speaking in all these languages because God wants *all these random people* to hear God's word in their very own tongues. Two crazy things: God is speaking to random people as if they mattered; and God is not giving them the ability to hear one universal language, but is speaking to them in the languages they already know.

This is what we learn on Pentecost: *We* are the sons and daughters who prophesy. *We* are the old and the young who see visions and dream dreams. Nobody was in Jerusalem that day because they'd gone through some kind of selection process; God poured the Holy Spirit out on all of them. And what we learn on Pentecost is also that we are the sons and daughters who *prophesy*; we are the old and young who *see visions and dream dreams*. Those are things that are given us to do.

Pentecost shakes us up. It should get us to turn off our auto-pilots. All of us here value action; we want to be the compassionate hands of God in a hurting world. But friends, if we do not tend to the still, small voice of God, we may spin our wheels being less than useful. We may become tired and cynical. When I set out to write a Pentecost sermon, I want to write something that energizes everyone and gives them a vision for action—but then I realized that I can't tell people what the Spirit is going to do or say, because *I don't know*. That's why we call it the Holy Spirit, right? It blows where it will and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit. (John 3:8) Rather, the Pentecost sermon should set us all up to listen better and watch better.

Mary Oliver, no slouch at careful observation, wrote this poem called "Wind

in the Pines”:

Is it true that the wind  
streaming especially in fall  
through the pines  
is saying nothing, nothing at all,

or is it just that I don't yet know the language?

You know that's a rhetorical question. "Is it just that I don't yet know the language?"

Mary Oliver is saying that she hears the wind but does not understand its language—*yet*. And the implication is that she will continue listening, and will come to know its language. It takes time and discipline and daily practice to hear what we are not used to hearing, to understand what we have not expected to understand. What would that be for me, I wonder? What would it be for you?

Mary Pipher tells a story that's oddly Pentecostal. Mary Pipher is a family therapist who came into my awareness in the 1990s when she published a book called *Reviving Ophelia*, about raising resilient daughters. She's also written about refugees and elderly people, and is active in the Nebraska environmental movement. For me, Mary Pipher is a model of mindfulness and deep listening, and I was not surprised to learn recently that she's a Buddhist. The particular story that came to my mind was about a woman in Duluth (and Minnesota as much as Iowa is a culture in which the most splendid things are cloaked in mundanity) who was in a fender-bender with an older lady. She made sure her two children in the back seat were okay, and then she

ran up to this older lady who was sitting in her car a little stunned. She asked, "Are you all right, are you all right?" This older lady said, "Oh, dear, I'm just fine." They exchanged names and realized they live within a couple of blocks from each other. By the time they were ready to go home, they were friends.

The older woman said, "It looks as if you and the children could use some help. I'm going to start visiting you." And she ended up becoming a kind of grandparent to the children and a mother to this woman.

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may98/vol55/num08/The-Shelter-of-Each-Other@-A-Conversation-with-Mary-Pipher.aspx>

Friends, that's the work of the Holy Spirit right there. They didn't need to become friends; all that was required or expected was that they exchange insurance information in a civil way. The fact that they made friends and in fact created an intergenerational connection was pure God in action. And if you think that that kind of thing is too trivial to change the world, you do not properly appreciate the nature of God's power. It can be misunderstood as simple drunkenness at nine in the morning, but those who know better realize that God's M.O. is to act in very unassuming and misleadingly humble ways. To misunderstand that is to cut yourself off from the ways in which the Spirit may be leading you.

Today we celebrate the decisions of Anna and Sara to join the church as full members. Once again, let none of us be deceived by the ordinariness of the event—it's just us in our little coffee shop sanctuary, with these girls we've known forever. No, sisters and brothers, these are young women on whom God *dots*, whom God watches with joy and pleasure as they grow and develop their own ways of discerning God's presence. Both of them have brought music to confirmation class and to church a few times, because their hearts are stirred by the movement of the Spirit in those songs. Anna is a storyteller. Sara is an artist. And they're just beginning. Who knows what more the Holy Spirit will do through each of these new members of the Body of Christ? We must all pay close attention to the movement of

the Spirit, here and during the week, because there are visions and dreams waiting  
for us to perceive them.

Let us pray.

Lord  
Take me where you want me to go,  
Let me meet who you want me to meet  
Tell me what you want me to say,  
and keep me out of your way.

-The Rev. Mychal Judge O.F.M.  
d. 9/11/2001