Pentecost, June 4, 2017 All Saints, Peterborough

When I was a little girl, when I was angry or upset I would get this hard, stony feeling in my chest. I felt I couldn’t breathe or even cry; I felt solid and cold as ice. Back in the hidden corner of my bedroom between the bed and the dresser was a little wall heater vent about 12 inches by 8 inches, low to the ground. When I felt this cold anger come upon me I would sit cross-legged in front of the heater with my head leaned against the wall. Hot air would flow out of the vent directly onto my chest. Slowly, slowly I would feel the ice start to melt. With the help of the heater vent I would eventually begin to talk things out with myself or cry and release pent up anger and sadness. After awhile I would feel I could get up and leave my room and face the world again, ready to move on and forward.

Years later when I began to read and study the Bible, I heard stories about the Holy Spirit for the first time. I read images of the Holy Spirit as a warm breath or fresh wind breathing new life, faith and courage into the prophets and disciples. I heard Paul’s words explaining that the Spirit empowered people with special gifts that could be used to help others. I heard Jesus explaining to his friends that the Spirit would come and offer comfort in times of trouble, guidance in times of confusion. I read these stories and I thought back to my little heater vent, and the warm comfort I had felt as I crouched there. Looking back I am reminded of the hymn, “Breathe on me, breath of God, until my heart is pure, until with thee I will one will, to do or to endure.”

Pentecost, which we observe today, in Jesus’ time was a Jewish holiday fifty days after Passover. That’s why so many Jews, including Jesus’ disciples, were gathered there together when the Holy Spirit came upon them. Before Jesus left his disciples and ascended into heaven, he had promised them that God would send them an advocate and guide, a comforter and strengthener, who would give them courage, would give them gifts to help them do God’s work. The Spirit would unify them as one body of believers who would live and work together to spread God’s message of love and mercy for all people.

In the passage read from the Book of Acts today the Spirit comes upon the disciples first as a wind and then as a flame upon their heads, and then in the gift of speaking in different languages so that all could understand their message of God’s love. God blessed and empowered the disciples for ministry in this event, but even more importantly they experienced God’s desire to reach out and bring together all people, no matter their race or religion or gender. God’s love has no barriers or boundaries. This was not a special ceremony in a private room for a chosen few, but a public showing of God’s connection with and care for all people. No one was left out- not women and children, not slaves or gentiles, not poor or disabled. All were included in the gift of God’s loving, blessing, empowering presence. The disciples were literally touched by the breath of God, warmed by the fire of God, filled with the power and burning desire to go out and share God’s love with the whole world.

The word *inspire* means to be filled with the Spirit, to in-spire, to breathe in spiritual energy and creativity and courage. Maybe you have had a taste of this feeling sometime when the Spirit gave you power or courage to do something you didn’t think you could, or inspired you with an idea or a vision, or comforted you with a sense that you are not alone even though you’re suffering or discouraged. The Buddhist monk Thich Nat Han reminds us to breathe in this simple way every day: “Breathing in, I come home to myself. Breathing out, I smile.” When I am stressed or overwhelmed, this simple act of breathing and remembering that God is with and within me, allows me to face what needs to be done, to risk what needs to be said. What athlete, actor or artist, teacher, coach or friend, has not sometime experienced being filled with the power to overcome fear and take the risk to do or say something that seemed almost to come from outside yourself, or maybe from deepest within yourself.

I remember one time in my life that I felt most fearful and least effective or creative was when I first started work as a hospital chaplain as part of my ministry training. I was placed in the VA hospital in White River Junction, where all of my patients were men and mostly much older men, who had been through war and lifetimes of hard work and hard living. Many of them were farmers or laborers whose hands and faces showed the wear of long, cold days and often, hard-drinking nights. What was I, then a 26 year old single, female, divinity student going to be able to offer these men? What were they going to think of me, having the audacity to ask them about their pain, their sorrows, their faith? As I stood in the hall outside each hospital room I felt sick to my stomach, I wanted to cry with fear and embarrassment, but each time I took a deep breath and forced myself to walk in and start talking with some man I didn’t know.

Those first few days I felt mostly absurd and useless, until one wonderful man, suffering terribly from a long infected wound on his leg, grabbed my hand with tears in his eyes and asked me to pray with him, asked me to help him believe God was with him in his pain. I gripped his hand and closed my eyes with a kind of desperation, wondering what to say. Suddenly, I felt words come to me and spill out of my mouth. I felt a love for this man I didn’t even know, I felt strength and courage surge through me and into him. Afterward, he smiled and hugged me gratefully, made me know that he felt comforted.

We both experienced the Holy Spirit that day, giving us courage, comfort, strength, and inspiration to see our lives and the tasks we had to face in a new way. I never again felt the same numbing fear as I offered a hand to hold or asked a man if he wanted to pray. Sometimes I got a weird look or an embarrassed rejection, but I felt that God was somehow with me and them and would come forth when the time was right.

Many of us have had personal experiences of God’s Spirit working within us, giving us courage and power and inspiration.  But on the Day of Pentecost, God did not just touch individual believers. On that day the Church was born, a community was created, and this beloved community was given the job to go forth and share love, to share the Gospel message of healing and forgiveness, with the whole world.

The Holy Spirit doesn’t just touch individuals, it creates communities and movements. The Spirit inspired the first church communities, sparked the Monastic movement, lit the fires of the Reformation. And in our country’s more recent history the Holy Spirit inspired the abolitionist movement, the women’s suffrage movement, the Civil Rights movement, the environmental movement. These movements working and praying for justice were not just social and political, they were deeply spiritual, brought about by the holy conviction and working of the Spirit in groups of faithful people, that God was calling them to make right great wrongs, and keep working toward a society which respects and loves every human being and even all creation.

Jamie asked in her sermon last week- how will the world know the Spirit is at work among us? They will know us by our fruits, she answered, those fruits Paul named: love and joy, peace and patience, kindness and compassion, forgiveness and faithfulness, and trust in God’s guidance. When these are present, we know the Spirit is at work within and among us.

The Spirit is moving here at All Saints. It’s calling us to discernment and decisions about our spiritual legacy to future saints in our community. Where are we being inspired to share love, build community, or even right wrongs?

The Holy Spirit is calling us to pray and work with faith and courage, to imagine where our mission as a community of All Saints might grow.

So let’s ask ourselves, what warms our hearts, gives us a feeling of power and energy? What sparks our imaginations? What fills us with love and a sense of connection? There is where the Spirit is leading us.

Come Holy Spirit, Come be with us and work through us. Amen.