

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
 May 23, 2010 (Pentecost/Confirmation)
 Acts 2:1-21; "What does this mean?"
 The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

That first Pentecost must have been something to behold – 50 days after Easter – the fulfillment of the Easter promise that Luke tells us about in Jesus' words: "See, I am sending upon you what my Father promised." Imagine being there that day when God's power, the Holy Spirit, came upon the disciples who were gathered to pray. With a great gust of wind the Spirit came – people began to speak in tongues – every foreign language of the time – tongues of fire, Luke tells us. No wonder some people there thought they were filled with new wine. The crowd received the gift of the Holy Spirit right there – what a joyful gift! This is the beginning of the church – a body of diverse people united by Christ, called to proclaim the story, the good news. We learn that about 3,000 people were baptized that day – and day by day, the Lord added to their numbers. Such excitement that day!

The people there watching kept asking, "What does this mean?" And if there's one question that is repeated over and over again in confirmation class, it's precisely that: what does this mean? And add to this the almost universal question of the confirmands, what is this that we call the Holy Spirit? Seems to me this is the part of the Trinity that's most difficult to articulate, to describe – it's so full of mystery that words can fail us.

The Spirit, though, is described as wind – a sound, a movement that came over the crowd. Now, we all know we can't see wind – we can only feel it, see the effects of it – how do we describe something we can't see but only feel?

I was thinking about my flights in a hot air balloon – all movement guided by the wind. We would watch the sun rise as we drifted high above tree tops – I remember thinking then what a deeply spirit filled, awesome experience that was and that still makes me wonder how we can let go and let the spirit lead us as the wind leads the balloons.

So like the wind, we can only describe what the Holy Spirit does. And to do that, we have to recognize the spirit – we must name it – we must name the action as the work of the Spirit. No, this effect is not that of new wine – it's the spirit brought upon us by God's promise. It's the spirit that allows us to encounter God. It's the power of God to be present to us. It's the Spirit that allows us to dig a little deeper.

So, it's on Pentecost when we join with our young people in the Rite of Confirmation – they've participated in a year of classes which have hopefully helped them dig a little deeper into what it is they believe – and what this all means. Confirmation is but a step in their journey – they all know that – it's an affirmation they make of the vows their parents made for them at baptism – each of them has made a conscious decision to do this – believe me, they're not rolling along with the crowd.

It's time for each of them to own their own faith, a time of more questions than answers, a time of facing struggle and of meeting it head on. And this class has done that – they've talked – a lot – they've listened – they've wondered. In each of the sections of

the class, knowing God, finding God, serving God, they have explored. They've explored who God is and what God does – they have learned the lessons of repentance and forgiveness in profound ways – the Ten Commandments are real to them as they've related them to their daily living - they've gone through the seasons of Advent and Lent and Easter learning more about Jesus. We've talked about some church history and spent time on the workings of our denomination, the United Church of Christ, and we spent time looking at our own church. Except for the Church council members and the Finance Ministry, I daresay that the confirmands knew more about the budget than most of the people who were at the annual meeting.

We've talked about why we serve God and we've spent time on the ways we can serve God – through our participation in the church, through the way we treat each other daily, and through doing service projects – they all had to do 5 this year – many of them worked at the Bethel Love food pantry and soup kitchen. They've learned so much about our neighbors and themselves through these projects – and they have been a blessing to all they have helped. LeWanda tells me, you can bring your confirmands to help any time – they work when they're here! They don't just hang out – they are welcome anytime! They carried groceries to cars – heavy bags – and up flights of stairs in a walk-up apartment, helping a woman who couldn't have done that alone. And one day at the soup kitchen one of them cut up tomatoes for the fresh salad always served and later wrote, “After Bethel Love you know the impact that you have made on somebody's day, even if you only sliced a tomato and mixed a salad. You still help and it's amazing to know that you just fulfilled someone's hunger.”

Our discussions have also brought us into contemporary issues: how do we as Christians deal with the most pressing questions of our day? Issues like abortion, gay rights, discrimination, equality of all people, the extreme poverty that exists not only close to us, represented by the guests at the soup kitchen, but around the world – one of the students traveled to Africa this year and came back stunned by the discrepancy of our abundance and the abject poverty he saw on his trip.

It occurs to me that these classes are church at its best – when they disagreed they did it without being disagreeable. They asked questions – profound questions – hard questions - several of the students have had difficult, painful times around the death of dear friends or family members, the serious illness of family members – the prayers of intercession they offered during these times were breathtaking. During the year most of them became comfortable enough to risk sharing their deepest thoughts, their struggles with their faith, their joys of their faith – if not aloud, certainly in their writings. And I truly believe we all have those questions, doubts and joys as well – none of us have all the answers – we're all called to grow in our faith, to share our faith, to live out our faith. Our confirmands take comfort in that I think – and they want to share their journey with us. They so very clearly expressed this hope in letters each of them wrote to the church:

From one of the confirmands: I like the worksheets we do and talk about – I like them because there are so many different answers – we always learn from what other people's point of views on God are – and that helps us all learn more about God.

And this: the church is very important to me because it helps guide me in my spiritual education and journey. God would want people to support and help each other – to help others on their journey. As I am deepening my spiritual journey, I would like to help others with theirs as well.

Can you feel the wind of Pentecost blowing through us here and now?

Another confirmand says, coming to church signals a new beginning – I can receive the strength and hope that I need to live my life to the fullest.

One wrote, one of my favorite parts of the church is that no matter what age somebody is they can come to church if they feel lost or alone, happy or sad. Whether you're a kid or an adult, it doesn't matter because the church is really there to give help to those who seek it. It also gives people a sense of hope, whether it is for something small or something more serious such as addiction recovery.

Also: I like that the church is open to all people. I like the opportunity in worship to improve my relationship with God – I look forward to participating in worship instead of just counting down until church school.

And listen to these profoundly honest words from one of the confirmands: I've been going to this church since I was little and it never really meant much to me before. Now I'm learning what the purpose of all this is, the purpose of all this knowledge and good will stuff. I think it's all very interesting and I like the idea of helping people in the name of Christ and God. I don't completely get the purpose of all this worshipping and traditions that we have, but isn't that the purpose of confirmation, to teach me about and ready me for my journey with Christ and the Holy Trinity. Any way, it really seems like these people know what they're talking about and I trust them enough to guide me in the right direction, so I think I'm ready to be confirmed.

The winds of Pentecost are blowing amid and around and through us.

Confirmands, you're role models for all of us – you've struggled with the journey of finding God, knowing God, serving God – you've asked hard questions, you've sought answers recognizing that sometimes there aren't any, you've participated in the life of this church in so many ways – large and small – and you've come to feel safe here, comfortable here, and you want to share this with others. You've brought friends to our confirmation classes – that's the first time that's happened – and they too have participated and learned something along the way. One of them even asked me if he could come here to worship – of course! And I believe some of your friends are here today sharing this most special day with you.

Members and friends of this congregation: let's pay attention to what our confirmands are teaching us. They understand evangelism though they may not use the word. They understand the importance of a personal invitation to come to worship. And they understand that the more they participate, the more they become closer to God. Aren't those lessons for us as we consider ways of enriching our life together.

If we can all come together using our God given gifts, we will go forth and make disciples – we'll serve our neighbor – in large and small ways – but we'll always serve. And this church will become an even brighter beacon of light in a hurting world. And every Sunday, indeed every day, can be full of the Pentecost celebration.

It is always an honor to walk with this class on their journey to confirmation when they say "yes" for themselves to those same questions their parents answered on their baptism. Our church is strengthened, made more complete, by their participation – and they model for us a way of living their faith. By being in worship. In class. In the world making their contribution, serving as they have been served. Their enthusiasm is contagious! These confirmands love their church and want others to experience that

same joy and welcome and even challenge they feel. They won't let us down – and we cannot let them down either. With God's help, we won't.

We are all here together in one place – just as those early disciples were when they heard the sound like the rush of a violent wind. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.

We're all here together in one place, too, trying to discern what God is calling forth from us. We need each other to be church at its best. In fact, to be church *at all* for church is never an individual effort. Our confirmands know that – in fact, many of them expressed gratitude for the opportunity to get to know each other better in class, in worship, in working together, and having lots of fun together. And they look forward to more!

Thank you, confirmands, for your spirit – for your willingness to be honest – for your enthusiasm – for your faith sharing – most of all, for being you – my brothers and sisters in Christ. Welcome as you take your places as confirmed members of the Body of Christ – you always were part of the Body but today you said yes for yourselves to continue on this awesome, lifelong journey of becoming disciples of Christ! It won't always be easy but you're not alone – you have a whole community of people who will walk with you – we made promises too this morning. We're all in this together and that's the joy of church – let's turn our faces to the wind and celebrate God's leading us and walking with us on this awesome journey of discipleship.

God bless you this day and always – and again, welcome! We are glad you're here.

Let us pray:

We thank you for this group of young people who today affirm their baptism in the rite of confirmation. We thank you that they take their place as members of the church with all the freedom and responsibility and accountability that comes with that. Strengthen their commitment, renew our commitment, to witness to the Spirit's power. Give each of us the ability through the Spirit to spread its fruits to a hurting, divided world, so often bent on its own destruction.

Spirit of beauty, Spirit of love, Spirit of hope, comforting Spirit, healing Spirit, patient Spirit, Spirit of peace, Holy Spirit of God, descend upon our hearts and abide now and forevermore. Amen.