

This is an unassuming package of coffee. Just a brick, really. But it's captured my attention this morning, or I suppose it's labeling has: "Vacuum-packed and sealed," it says. Coincidentally, it's also liturgical. Red for Pentecost! I hope that means we don't have to stick to decaf for Ordinary time.

These coffee grounds live in a vacuum. Inside the walls of this foil, it's fair to say that these grounds can do anything they want, or nothing at all. These grounds could arm themselves with weaponry; they have autonomy over their bodies, or uh, bean parts. They can say, or smell, or stay frozen anyway they so choose. Because at the end of the day they are their own separate, impenetrable, completely disconnected entity. Inside that sealed package they can't so much as wiggle my coffee cups and saucers, even with their loudest protestations and most violent vibrations.

But...what if I used a pair of scissors, and I cut the seal of this package? I'm not going to do that by the way, because I wouldn't dare deprive my daughters of getting to hear that cool wooshing sound they love. If the seal is removed, the coffee grounds would no longer be separate. Their very presence would fill the room with a strong aroma within seconds. If they leaked out of the bag, I'd spend the rest of the hour vacuuming them out of the carpet fibers. And eventually, if I just left them alone, they would spoil. At this point, their value is revealed in community integration. They can be combined with steaming or dripping water, converted into a tasty bean juice, and shared with the humans with whom they now occupy the same ecosystem. And I'd like to believe that the energy, or the umph, or what John might call the logos/word these coffee grounds create in others will ultimately be transformed into acts of love and service.

Jesus, and the disciples, and the apostles, and the earliest Jesus-followers, and really us too at times, all live or have lived in a world that supposes humans exist in a vacuum seal. Luke's gospel, I believe, has a gentle-but-pointed way of reminding us of our seal. The prodigal sons seeking pieces of their father's affection, that's the older one and the younger one; the priest and the Levite avoiding the injured man on the Jericho Road; the Rich Young Ruler too tied to his wealth; and the disciples in their own moments of desiring power, all seek out things that are in their own best interest. They've been programmed to apply a kind of Torah that asks what they are righted to instead of to whom and to what they are called. Torah, for them, and too often for us, is not a tool to help shape our love for God and neighbor. It's a tool to justify an elevated love of self over God and neighbor.

But a funny thing happened on his way to the wilderness. Jesus was baptized, and upon being baptized, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove upon him. That's a fancy way of saying that God's overwhelming sense of love, empathy, kindness, and creative breath flowed through his life force. Jesus comes up from baptismal waters broken like a coffee seal. For the rest of his life and ministry he sees himself as wholly connected to everything around him. And his every action is oriented toward the love of God and neighbor, and all of creation.

I think what the Holy Spirit allows Jesus to do is to see the difference between life and lifelessness. Jesus can see what it means to be lost in a desire for an inheritance or a parent's affirmation; Jesus can see what it means to be so lost in your own security you forget the wellbeing of others; Jesus can see what it means to be lost in an all-consuming material wealth; Jesus can see what it means to be lost in the emptiness of systems that promote uneven distributions of power – he

knows that wielding power unjustly and retributively isn't a cure for not having it.

Jesus sees life, experiences life, abundant life, in connecting to neighbors. He knows their names. He knows their stories. He not only acknowledges and affirms their createdness, but he also celebrates it! And Jesus shares his God-given fulfillment with anyone who wants it. He's also 100% willing to receive the sacred giftedness of others. That's the Spirit!

And here's the best news all day, Sardis. Today's text in Acts, the sequel to Luke, tells us that the same Spirit that infused Jesus at his baptism infused the apostles, and all who will follow, on the day of Pentecost.

We get this wonderful account of miracles. A thousand tongues speaking a thousand languages from a thousand generations. Dead languages, live languages, languages not even yet imagined, spoken by representatives from all over the world, and each understood and received.

There is wind, like a lot of wind.

And there is fire. So much fire!

And it's really a wonderful story. But I gotta be honest with you, the miracle isn't capturing my attention this morning, and I know that doesn't seem right, because vacuum-sealed coffee did. Maybe it's because we have Babel and other language apps at our disposal, and through the power of Netflix we can stream our favorite international programming in the dubbing and subtitles of our choice, and we can

ride rides at Universal Studios that have all the wind and fire we would care to procure, thank you very much.

None of these are reasons for my disinterest in miracles. We are living in hyper-partisan, hyper-polarized, hyper-selfish times. There isn't one tower of Babel, there are millions of them, maybe even eight billion of them scattered and secluded in their own little spaces of self-righteousness and disconnectedness. What we desperately need is a world that practices empathy and acts upon its findings. That is to say, we need a world where we know and listen to our neighbors, and we center our living on meeting the collective needs of community.

Don't get lost in the mechanics of Pentecost. Some kind of cosmic injection of God's Spirit – God's empathy, love, compassion, and creative breath in a bottle – infused the city of Jerusalem, and empowered by that infusion, they communicated with authenticity and neighborliness. On one glorious morning, everyone prophesied, and everyone saw visions and dreams, and everyone listened, really listened to one another, and the Spirit fell fresh upon every imaginable kind of person.

The event was fleeting, but its long-term effects were not. Later in this same chapter, we hear about the Acts church, the group of believers who remained in Jerusalem, inspired by the Spirit:

Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad

and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:43-47, NRSV).

The Spirit infused God's people in such a way as to make them eager to communicate and connect with one another. The Spirit empowers each of us to do the same. And that's no small thing. In fact, it's the very reason we celebrate Pentecost. We are just as capable of building a kind of community that cares for one another in deed, word, and spirit.

I know it's been a rotten couple of weeks. Our world is tormented by violence and apathy: war, mass shootings, domestic abuse, legislative abuse, denominational abuse, the kind that cuts uncomfortably close to our own roots, just a whole mess of meanness. This morning, I want to hear the howls of a mighty wind, and the chorus of a thousand diverse voices, and feel the heat of a fiery flame that can sweep away all of this lifelessness in an instant.

Why can't we be the spark that gets it going, Sardis? Because it seems to me that those first believers didn't have to do anything all that miraculous to galvanize the momentum gained by the Spirit. They lived with empathy, and they let the findings of that empathy guide their living.

Are you a stranger in a strange land? How can we welcome you as a neighbor? And how might we reconsider our own customs and traditions that deem you strange instead of neighborly?

What's our current language? How might we infuse it with love to listen and speak more effectively and humanely to others?

Unsealed  
Bob Stillerman  
Pentecost Sunday, 6-5-2022  
Acts 2:1-21



a spiritually  
progressive  
community  
of faith

And not for nothing, Sardis, we do have polices that insure us against damage from fire, and winds, and even earthquake. Perhaps today is the day we allow the Spirit to stir up a storm in our own hearts and minds. What might one voice, or ten voices, or a hundred voices of empathy generate for our world?

I dare say, a whole lot more than a sealed brick.

It's the day of Pentecost, y'all. I vote for the woouooooosshhhh of the Spirit. And the connectedness it offers us to God and neighbor.

Amen.