

Considering Seemingly Insurmountable World Problems
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
May 5, 2024, Sixth Sunday of Easter
John 7:37-39a; 14:12a, 15-20, 25-27; 16:13

Responsive Reading *adapted from Joel 2 & Acts 2*

Leader: In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,

People: **And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,**

Leader: And your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

People: **Even on those you would least expect,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit,
and they shall prophesy.**

Leader: And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

People: **The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of that day.
Those who turn to the Spirit
shall find the way through those days.**

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Sixth Sunday of Easter. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

Jesus was moved with compassion and did all he could to help the suffering he saw, partly by loving, healing and teaching, partly by protesting and working for positive social change, and most of all by creating a loving community as an outpost of God's realm on earth that would do far more than he could alone. One of his key teachings was for us to pray always and not give up and we will receive the help we need.

The church is one of the answers to our prayers. Whatever our struggle, we can find comfort, wisdom and strength for our journey here, in words, music, the presence of the Spirit, and in what we have to offer to one another after the final amen. So please linger to greet one another with open hearts, extending compassion and care, letting the Spirit show us what it means to love our neighbor as our self in this time and place with these beloved people...

Call to Worship The miraculous, world-changing day of Pentecost is approaching and Eastertide is starting to anticipate it. Today's message is one of hope—the hope we need when we face seemingly insurmountable problems. We will hear the prophet Joel promise that a Spirit of prophecy and vision will come to us to match our need, and that turning to God and heeding the Spirit is the path to survival.

Pentecost was the big bang of that Spirit forming the first church, and the church is still a place where we find the Spirit at work among us. Let us worship together in that faith and hope.

Considering Seemingly Insurmountable World Problems

Easter season is about light and new life bursting forth. By the Sixth Sunday the scriptures start giving us hints of what is coming next. After the emergence of new life, we have to nurture it and help it grow to fruition, and that is the work of the Spirit. The Spirit of life, of the universe, of God, of Christ—whatever you call that higher power—is what guides individual life-spans through their developmental stages, and guides species through their evolution.

Throughout human history people have seen that a Spirit or muse of some kind sparks new insights and perspectives. It inspires creativity and changes of consciousness. It lifts up prophets, visionaries and innovators who help society evolve.

The Spirit blasted into the first church at Pentecost, which we will celebrate on May 26th, but this Sunday we get a preview of what the Spirit can do for us as a source of inspiration and hope. Today we reflect on our need for the Spirit, and the specific ways and places we can look to find its gifts.

We can see how the Spirit has helped in the past. Hebrew prophets like Joel were part of a major evolutionary leap that humanity made in what is called the Axial Age when Greek philosophy and literature and Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism all emerged. There was a

Spirit at work. The way people looked at the world changed. Civilization evolved a step along the path toward ideals like individual freedom, human rights, democracy, justice, nonviolence and the perception of oneness and interconnection among all humans and all life on earth.

That path took another major leap during the 17th and 18th Century Age of Enlightenment (or Age of Reason), and another during the 20th Century age of pluralism and environmentalism. We are still on that evolutionary path leading toward an ideal way to live on earth, and both the ideals and the ability to grow toward them can be traced to the Spirit of life that moves through our hearts and minds and all creation.

Not everyone sees it this way. Some argue that everything is random and what matters is what we make of things, but that's exactly what I would call the Spirit. It is what rises in a human to make something of life, and to address "seemingly insurmountable world problems."

That phrase comes from an example of the Spirit at work right here—the dreams for our congregation that we expressed in conversations together in the fall of 2017 that led to the Future Directions Vision statements on the pew card and on our website.

The longer version says, "We hope to consider seemingly insurmountable world problems and find a ladder of faith, hope and love to climb out into thought and action, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit."

We have followed our Future Directions Vision over the past six years and it has led to our work on the climate crisis and antiracism and to our becoming an Open and Affirming congregation. It has led us to have healthy communication workshops and learn a new way to have big or difficult conversations. It has led us to help Strafford have a community nurse and a nursery for infants and toddlers. It led us through Covid and out the other side with the technology to share services online for those who cannot come in person.

And here we are today, with a whole set of seemingly insurmountable world problems and with some big questions about our own lives as individuals and a congregation. The world is still far from the ideals that the Axial Age and Enlightenment formulated, far from the highest ideals of the age of pluralism and environmentalism, and there is a powerful movement in our country right now to move backward from those ideals.

Meanwhile churches are dwindling. Younger generations have been alienated from institutional religion by scandals and fundamentalist extremism.

Whole denominations are facing this seemingly insurmountable problem, so we are not alone, but we have our own unique congregation and community, and while it helps to see how others are responding, ultimately we need to find what is right for us.

The Spirit sparked the first church into being and kept the church going through many hard times in the past. We need that Spirit's help again today, and it is still speaking through prophets and visionaries, poets and musicians, grandmothers and young children, wise teachers and all of nature.

The Spirit also speaks through the collected wisdom of the past, which is one of the gifts that churches and spiritual traditions of all kinds have to offer. Here is a quick summary of what today's scriptures have to say to us in our need.

The responsive reading began, "In the last days..." The Spirit of life can always be found, but especially in times of crisis and transition, in any kind of last days when life is threatened or at a turning point. Churches or nations or planets that are in crisis or transition can expect the Spirit's guidance and power, as can individuals.

The responsive reading says the Spirit will speak through visions and dreams, through young and old, through nature and those we least expect.

Struggle and suffering do not mean that the Spirit is absent. The important thing is to keep turning and listening and watching for the Spirit to show the way through to new life.

In the gospel readings Jesus affirms that the Spirit flows out of our heart, or, as the Greek word means literally, out of our belly or gut. If we believe in the Spirit enough to seek it by quieting our mind and opening to our deepest core, we will find what we are thirsting for, flowing through us.

The gospel reading says Spirit is not for us alone, it wants to move us to do the same kind of works that Jesus did, and Jesus says it will help us do even greater works. Look at the Spirit-filled small groups of committed citizens who have gone on to free entire nations or end slavery. Look at Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa who in their 80s had helped many thousands more than Jesus was able to do in his short life.

The gospels say over and over that love is the key. Love of the Spirit, love of those the Spirit flows through, love of a neighbor, stranger or enemy as our self—these forms of love bring

us into alignment with the sacred way where the Spirit comforts, guides and empowers us and leads us to the truth.

The Spirit gives those who feel lost and orphaned in this world a spiritual family and home. We can find deep inner peace in the midst of whatever crisis we face, and freedom from a fearful, fretting heart.

The Spirit has led all of us here today to this family and home. Let us join together, quieting our minds and opening our hearts wide to feel the Spirit flowing within and among us, leading us through our seemingly insurmountable problems. Let us pray in silence...

Haiku by Mel Goertz
Daffodils everywhere
transforming March light
into yellow blossoms.