

June 4, 2017
The Day of Pentecost
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Acts 2: 1-21
Psalm 104:25-35, 37
1 Corinthians 12:3b-13
John 7:37-39

I was skimming one of my church-related email blasts last week and came across a reference to something called the Positive Lexicography Project. The originator is a professor and author who specializes in the field of “positive psychology.” He has compiled online what he calls “an evolving index of ‘untranslatable’ words related to wellbeing from across the world’s languages.”¹ According to an article in *The New Yorker*, he gathered “words in foreign languages that described positive traits, feelings, experiences, and states of being that had no direct counterparts in English.”²

That article went on to describe the project’s collection as “a veritable catalogue of life’s many joys, featuring terms like *utepils* (Norwegian, ‘a beer that is enjoyed outside ... particularly on the first hot day of the year’), *mbuki-mvuki* (Bantu, ‘to shed clothes to dance uninhibited’), *tarab* (Arabic, “musically induced ecstasy or enchantment”), and *gigil* (Tagalog, ‘the irresistible urge to pinch/squeeze someone because they are loved or cherished’).”³ The author’s stated aim was to expose cultural expressions of wellbeing so as to increase the understanding and experience of wellbeing.⁴ He may be on to something; I got a shot of wellbeing just from reading these examples.

Today’s lesson from Acts describes something that ought to have a special word in the wellbeing lexicon. It would be defined as, “to regale speakers of other languages, as if one has consumed too much wine.” For that, we don’t actually need a completely new word. We need simply turn a noun into a verb and say that on the day described, the disciples *pentecosted*.

Today is the Feast of Pentecost. If we were to list our favorite celebrations of the Church year, I would likely not start with Pentecost, but instead with Christmas and Easter. And yet one could argue that Pentecost should be number one. After all, Christmas and Easter commemorate events that happened once, and then were over: Jesus was born and Christ was risen; thereby salvation was secured once and for all. Pentecost is different: it commemorates the day the first followers of Jesus received the gift of the Holy Spirit; *and* it celebrates the Holy Spirit for having stuck around. It’s a gift that keeps on giving. For over two thousand years, the Holy Spirit has accompanied believers in changing times, in changing places, in changing situations. It accompanies us today, continuing to move through our lives and in the world around us.

The Holy Spirit is often described as a wind from God. Wind is simply moving air. Air is made up of the chemicals that sustain life for animals and plants. Its largest component is nitrogen; it also contains a large measure of oxygen and a small one of carbon dioxide. Animals take in oxygen and release carbon dioxide; plants take in carbon dioxide and release oxygen. It’s amazing, really, this beneficial exchange of the very same atoms between living things so different in type. Maybe *that’s* why I feel so compelled to talk to the plants in my office.

It seems to me that this exchange between things so different in type, this wave breaking back and forth, is a form of co-dependency. Though you don't hear much about it these days, "codependent" is a word that became common during the 1980s, peaking with the 1986 publication of the best-selling book *Codependent No More*. I read it during the 1990s, when most of my female friends were reading it, too. The word "codependent" is used to describe the behavior of a person who enables another person's dysfunctional behavior, to the extent that their sense of self becomes reliant on the dynamic.

Pathological codependency is certainly a problem. But I wonder if codependency is a word that deserves to be revisited. The fact is, despite our American individualism with its pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps ideal, we are all always mutually codependent in an infinite complex of relationships. Our entire daily routine is a series of exchanges. Regardless of where we are on the socio-economic map, we exist in what we might call codependent relationships with every aspect of creation. That's true whether we acknowledge it or not. It's true whether we like it or not. We are intimate participants in a codependent dance that does in fact contain the risk of turning pathological, to the detriment of all involved. In light of last week's events,⁵ the example that comes to mind is our American over-dependence on fossil fuels, and its effect on our planet. The solution is not to ignore our codependency, but rather to understand it so that we can transform it.

Let's start by recognizing that codependency must have been what God intended, because it's exactly how God created and later recreated. One aspect of the story of Pentecost is that it describes the Holy Spirit as available to the earth and its inhabitants without discrimination. Whether we can see it or not, it falls equally on privilege and deprivation. It falls on everyone and everything, and there's plenty enough to go around. If we tap into it, we can use our recharge to help others tap in, too.

The Holy Spirit draws us into the universal existence of which we are a part. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we trade competition for collaboration, and contempt for compassion, attaining a codependence that is not isolating illness but rather the most robustly contagious health. Maybe we need a new word for it, and maybe that word can increase our sense of wellbeing. How about something like *pentecostence*. We might define *pentecostence* as "behavior grounded in the Spirit-driven awareness that all people and in fact all the parts of creation are infinitely yet intimately interdependent, the pursuit of which behavior results in feelings of joy and peace."

Maybe the Positive Lexicography Project is correct that the revealing of the words brings us the wellbeing that the words describe. Our reading from First Corinthians reminds us of the varieties of spiritual gifts bestowed on individuals. We could say that we bring our gifts to our *pentecostent* relationships with other people and with all creation. With one Spirit, we are one Body.

As the note on the front of today's service bulletin says, this morning's liturgy was designed to reflect and emphasize the Pentecost themes of the gift of Holy Spirit to believers of all tongues, and their strengthening for mission by the Holy Spirit. This service's variety of languages and cultures is intended to remind us of the many languages and cultures that constitute the body of Christ; the mix perhaps evokes the holy chaos of the day of Pentecost. Ours is not the sole or the best expression of the Christian life; sometimes that the most important expression of Christian faith lies outside those doors. It's all part of the great codependent, or rather *pentecostent*, exchange.

Let's have a little bit more science. The common states of matter are solid, liquid and gas. Air is, of course, a gas. Gases contain much more energy than solids and liquids. Molecules of gas both vibrate and zip around rapidly, colliding with each other and filling the container within which they are bound. Unbound, those energetic molecules are free to roam all over.

Humans on average inhale and exhale about two gallons of air every minute. That two gallons of air contains something like 10^{23} molecules. That's a one with 23 zeros after it. My math may be off, but you get the drift: every minute we breathe gazillions of molecules. We can't see them, but I'm pretty sure it's okay to believe the science that tells us they are there.

To step closer to where I'm headed, let's try going with the metaphor that the Holy Spirit is wind from God. Let's imagine that molecules of Holy Spirit are in the air we breathe, each one vibrating and flying with energetic tiny wings. Even if those Holy Spirit molecules are only a very small proportion of the substances that make up the air we breathe, that would still be a whole lot of molecules.

This time of year, when we think or speak of air, it's likely because we're concerned about the contained allergens. As sneezes, congestion, and drippy noses demonstrate, allergens are substances miniscule in number but majuscule in impact. I can't cite the science, but I'm certain that the Holy Spirit *is* in the air we breathe. Maybe, like those irritating allergens, only a few molecules of Holy Spirit make a big difference. Maybe the Holy Spirit is like a *good* allergen: its molecules enter our bodies, but give us a sense of wellbeing and the strength to help bring that wellbeing to others. It's Pentecost: take a deep breath.

Notes

¹ From the opening page of the website of The Positive Lexicography Project, available online at <https://hifisamurai.github.io/lexicography/> (accessed June 3, 2017). It lists hundreds of words.

² Emily Anthes, "The Glossary of Happiness," *The New Yorker*, May 12, 2016, available at <http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-glossary-of-happiness> (accessed June 3, 2017).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Tim Lomas, from the abstract for his paper, "Towards a positive cross-cultural lexicography: Enriching our emotional landscape through 216 'untranslatable' words pertaining to well-being," *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, January 2016. The abstract is posted at Taylor & Francis Online, available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17439760.2015.1127993?journalCode=rpos20> (accessed June 3, 2017).

⁵ The event alluded to is President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement. For example, see Michael D. Shear, "Trump Will Withdraw U.S. From Paris Climate Agreement," *The New York Times*, June 1, 2017, available online at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/01/climate/trump-paris-climate-agreement.html?_r=0 (accessed June 3, 2017).