

INHALE – Preached by The Rev. Ruth E. Shaver at The United Church of Schellsburg, June 4, 2006
Pentecost
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Acts 2:1-4

One of the things I learned to do during my time at Second Church in Attleboro was knit. I learned because we started a prayer shawl group last fall. I managed to complete 3 shawls before I left – one of them mostly sitting in airports while I was interviewing for pastoral positions! While I was here in January, I was working on that shawl at Bill and Martha's, which got Martha's attention. She asked what I was working on. When I told her, she grinned at me and said, "When you get here – assuming you come – you've got to start a group here." Knitters and crocheters, beware – I'll be calling you.

Anyway, as my departure approached, the prayer shawl group knit a shawl for me. With 35 knitters at 9 rows apiece, it's a very long, cozy shawl. Our Interim Pastor suggested, not knowing that the other shawl was underway, that someone knit a red shawl for me in recognition and support of my first day here, red being the color of Pentecost. **[Pull out shawl and drape over pulpit]** This shawl was made by Pat, who taught me to knit. It comes with the prayers of our sister church in Attleboro for my ministry here and, by extension, for all of you, as well. They acknowledge being very happy for us and very sad for themselves at this change, so let us keep them in our prayers, particularly for their search process as it gets underway.

Today is indeed Pentecost, a day of new beginnings.

I'm going to assume that most of you, since you're sitting here without turning blue in the face, are like me in that we pretty much have breathing down to a science. But I noticed something last night as my cat, Apollo, snuggled in my arms sleeping.

He breathes properly.

His chest doesn't move when he breathes. Instead, his *stomach* expands and contracts as his lungs fill and empty, making the most efficient use of air possible. I've noticed that he does it when he's not sleeping, too.

As a singer, I had to be taught to breathe like that. Even now, I have to think about it to do it. Everyone take a deep breath for me and you'll see what I mean. What parts of your body moved? Probably your chest went out and your shoulders went up, right? Well, *proper* breathing, for the most effective intake of oxygen, requires using completely different sets of muscles. When you breathe properly, your *abdomen* is what expands when you inhale and what contracts when you exhale, like this. Exhaling properly is as important as inhaling properly.

Strange, isn't it, that we aren't programmed to inhale and exhale in the most effective way possible?

Thankfully, God exhales quite effectively.

God exhaled life into a pile of dust to create human beings, according to Genesis 2.

God exhaled life into the dry bones of Ezekiel's vision in the form of winds from the four corners, prophesying the restoration of the people of Israel to their land and the renewal of Judaism as a religion.

God exhaled life into the church on Pentecost in the form of a violent rushing wind and dancing flames, birthing the Holy Spirit into each disciple and assuring that Jesus' message of love and hope would go forth from Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria into all the world.

God exhaled life into the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, sparking a religious revival that resonates in the world 500 years later.

We are the blessed descendants of the man and woman who had the courage and wisdom to inhale when God breathed the breath of life into piles of dust. We are the blessed descendants of the men and women who had the courage to

return to Jerusalem from Babylon to rebuild their country and their religion when God breathed the breath of life onto their dry, brittle bones. We are the blessed descendants of men and women who had the courage and wisdom to inhale as a God breathed the breath of life into them through that violent wind of Pentecost. We are the blessed descendants of men and women who literally fought for their right to practice Christianity in their own way after God breathed the breath of life into them and allowed them to see the bankruptcy of official religion.

If God is still speaking, then God is still exhaling. The breath of life is blowing with just as violent a wind today as on the day of Pentecost. The fact that I am standing here on my first Sunday as your pastor and teacher is proof that you have had the courage to inhale at least a little over the past 14 months, despite the difficulties of being without a pastor. Together, we face the challenge of taking a full, deep breath in this violent rushing wind so that we can move into our future with confidence.

So what are we together as The United Church of Schellsburg being called to do after we inhale the breath of God?

That's a very good question, one to which I don't have a complete answer. Why not? Because I am not this church.

It's a very good question, one to which none of you have a complete answer. Why not? Because you are not this church.

It's a very good question, one to which we will have to find the complete answer together. Why? Because we are all this church now, brought together by the guidance of the Holy Spirit to inhale the breath of life for wisdom and courage so that we, like Adam and Eve, like the Israelites whose dry bones came to life and rebuilt a nation, like the disciples who went forth to preach and teach the Good News of Christ, can bring Good News to all people, like our Protestant forebearers who had the courage to think for themselves.

We do have at least some of the answer to the question. In the past, you have learned how to be an incredibly open church, one that welcomes strangers and helps them feel like friends within weeks of their first visit. In talking with several of you who were here when the merger took place, I've come to understand that the act of merging helped to create this environment of acceptance through the daily struggle early on to keep things together. In the course of the past 41½ years, the United Church has become a beacon of extravagant, inclusive welcome in a religious landscape where all too often newcomers are expected to present a certificate of adherence to a single set of strict beliefs in order to be allowed into the community. More than most churches, the United Church of Schellsburg lives out the United Church of Christ motto, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here."

The UCC has an advertising campaign with a couple of very clever commercials aimed at people who are not currently attending church – the very folks we hope to welcome here. These commercials were crafted by our ad agency after they listened to the heart-wrenching stories of the members of the focus groups, men and women chosen specifically because they identified themselves as non-churchgoing mainline Christians, Protestant and Roman Catholic. People told of being . . .

- . . .excommunicated because of divorce.

- . . .made to feel unwelcome because a child cried in the middle of a service.

- . . .discouraged from returning because they were a different race than the congregation.

- . . .turned away because they came to church with a partner of the same gender.

- . . .turned away because they came to church with a partner and/or children of a different race or ethnic background.

. . .unable to enter the building because of physical barriers.
. . .made to feel useless because of age, both too young and too old.
. . .shut out because they asked too many uncomfortable questions about doctrine.

The first ad in response to this incomplete laundry list showed two very buff bouncers at the door of a cathedral-like church determining who could and could not come in. The more recent commercial takes place inside the church, where offender after offender is literally ejected from the church through the ceiling by an anonymous finger pushing a red button. The last couple ejected look as though they fit right in, but they have noticed what's going on and are clearly on the verge of asking why.

The United Church of Schellsburg has never had bouncers, nor are we being asked to put bouncers outside the doors who will prevent people who aren't like us from coming inside. The United Church of Schellsburg has never had ejector seats, nor are we being asked to install ejector seats in our pews so that the ones who do get in past the bouncers will be thrown out anyway. We *are* being asked to proclaim our message of extravagant, inclusive welcome in our area in everything we do.

We *are* being asked to keep open the doors of our church and the doors of our hearts to those who have been shut out of churches and hearts because they don't fit into others' definitions of "acceptable" to Jesus. Ours is not to judge who Jesus loves; ours is to love each person simply because we know that Jesus loves each person for who they are: young or old, able or infirmed, red or yellow or black or white, married or unmarried, book smart or worldly wise, straight or gay, liberal or conservative, Pirates fan or Red Sox fan [hold up SOX mug], Steelers fan or Patriots fan . . . [hold up Pats mug]

We're going to start with that much of the answer, inhale the breath of life from our God of extravagant welcome, and seek more of the answer together over the next however many years we're called to journey together. Each and every one of you sitting here this morning is vital to this journey. I'm sure that each and every one of you knows someone who belongs who isn't here today or knows someone who is also vital to our journey if only they were here.

Inhale for me, nice and deep. That's it. Now that you're fortified by the breath of life, I'm going to be bold and ask you to do some homework this week:

INVITE someone to come to church with you next week. An old timer who hasn't darkened the doorstep since Dr. Correll left – or maybe since long before then! A neighbor who doesn't go to church because he or she hasn't found a place to fit in. Someone who seems to be looking for something more than the daily routine of work or school. Even someone who does go to church but has said they aren't happy with what's going on or what's being taught at their church. Don't be afraid to make the invitation; after all, the worst anyone can do is say no. We shouldn't be the best kept secret in Bedford County. We're a whole lot easier to find than Gravity Hill, after all!

Inhale. Let the power of God's breath of life sustain you in this week to come, and may that same breath of life sustain us all as we start this journey together on the day the Holy Spirit birthed the church universal. Amen!