

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on May 23, 2010 (Pentecost)

“Guerrilla Marketing.” It’s a term that refers to promotions that rely on creativity and energy rather than on big marketing budgets (and, for the record, that’s “guerilla” as in guerilla warfare; not “gorilla” as in ape). Successful guerilla marketing campaigns are unusual, unconventional, and unexpected. Publicity stunts in public places are hallmarks of this approach because guerilla marketing is all about generating buzz for a particular product in ways that circumvent the norms of conventional advertising.

These campaigns can promote products but they have also been used to rally support for causes. One of the best known cases took place in Paris about five years ago when an organization called Médecins du Monde (Doctors of the World) pulled off a wildly successful campaign to promote its cause of providing care for vulnerable populations around the world. As part of an effort to draw attention to the plight of the homeless they distributed 300 tents to homeless Parisians. The homeless gathered in groups of 8 to 10 in public places creating mini “tent cities” with the tents that bore the Doctors of the World logo. This drew immediate attention to the number of homeless people in the city and provoked such public outrage that the city acted by quickly announcing the allocation of \$10 million for emergency housing.

Of course sometimes these risky guerilla marketing strategies go awry. Some of you may remember the strange light displays that were set up around Boston a few years ago. The police shut down several T-stops and a portion of I-93 mistaking them for possible explosive devices. The suspicious objects turned out to be ads for a new animated television series for adults.

You could argue that the Pentecost event was a guerilla marketing coup. The disciples were all gathered together awaiting the promised Holy Spirit. Suddenly they heard that sound like the rush of a violent wind and tongues like fire descended upon them and as they were filled with the Holy Spirit they began to speak in all sorts of languages. And it caused such a ruckus – that noise of all the different languages being spoken by a bunch of uneducated Galileans – that the whole city started talking about it. Sure, some of them thought the disciples were drunk or out of their minds. But it made a profound impact and drew many to this new faith based on the good news of Jesus Christ.

Of course Pentecost wasn’t a divine marketing scheme but the fulfillment of the Paschal Mystery; the completion of Jesus’ ministry marked by his death, resurrection, and ascension. The coming of the Holy Spirit is what allows us to be the church in the world. And thus, the speaking in tongues is not a marketing trick but a sign that God equips us with the ability to communicate God’s love. We are all equipped to do this – perhaps not in Swahili or even Pig Latin – but in the language of how we live out our lives. We communicate in ways that transcend the spoken word and people all around us take notice. Which means we all have an ongoing opportunity to be guerilla warriors of the risen Christ. Onward Christian soldiers!

This past week Hingham made the national news when St. Paul School rescinded its offer of admission to the 8-year-old son of a lesbian couple. Any time Hingham ends up on Good Morning America, it's hard not to take notice. And while I'm pretty sure Jesus said something like, "Let the little children come to me," I also think this is a great place for the Holy Spirit to float in and change some pre-conceived notions; to burst open the hearts and minds of those of us imprisoned by human rules. I'm not picking on our brothers and sisters down the street when I question the human culture of exclusion over and against Jesus' message of radical inclusion. To varying degrees we are all guilty of this; of proclaiming the gospel with our lips while not fully living it out in our lives.

We are all spiritual works in progress, dependent upon the Holy Spirit for guidance. And as we seek to navigate the line between our perception of God's law and divine compassion, the Spirit often leads us to new ways of thinking and believing and being. It is undoubtedly a balance; one that provides a hopefully creative tension between what is at the core of our faith and what demands flexibility and compassion.

All of which is to say that the Holy Spirit is the church's "X Factor." The Spirit doesn't play by the rules; it doesn't conform to creeds or church canons. It's been known to blow through our pre-conceived notions and resistance to change – sometimes gently, sometimes boldly. Scripture tells us that the Spirit blows where it will; that it is the *ruach* of God – literally the breath of God. The breath of God can be as gentle as a dove and as strong as a hurricane. It can get into places we cannot see.

Which means that the Holy Spirit is both life-giving and cause for concern. Because we don't often know what to do with it. It doesn't fit into our liturgical lock boxes. What if it makes us start speaking in tongues? What if it makes changes to the status quo? What if it opens our hearts to new ways of thinking and being? What if it makes us admit the child of two women to a local elementary school? Unlike the Cape Wind project, the Holy Spirit cannot be harnessed or manipulated for our own purposes and that's the part that makes us nervous.

You can't see the Holy Spirit in the same way that you can't see air or breath or wind. But in the same way that you can see your own breath in the winter or you can see the effects of a strong wind, the impact of the Spirit is real.

In a few moments we will baptize three children with water and the Holy Spirit. And after we do so, I will pray over them what's known as the prayer for the seven-fold gifts of the Spirit.

"Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon these your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised them to the new life of grace. Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works."

We are all baptized into the Holy Spirit. May it blow where it will and lead us all into the truth, transformation, surprise, and glory of God.