

A Kansas farmer knew he was living in a territory where tornados were likely so he bought wind damage insurance. Sixty-seven times the tornado sirens went off and he and his family climbed down into their storm cellar. And sixty-seven times he came back up to find everything still in perfect order. But on the 68th time when he emerged from his storm cellar he found his barn half blown down and the house completely missing. He responded, "Good, now that's more like it!"

This year we all know the power of the wind. Tornados have wreaked havoc in many cities across the country, and hurricane season is just beginning. Who knows what more will be in store. And so on this Pentecost Day when we read about Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit onto the disciples and the Holy Spirit coming with a sound like the rush of a mighty wind we know that we're dealing with some really powerful stuff.

When many people think of the Holy Spirit I think they imagine a gentle breeze; like some cool refreshing evening air after a very hot day. The Holy Spirit often feels subtle and quiet. The hymn we will sing after the sermon is *Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness*, and it almost sounds like a lullaby. But if you pay close attention to the words you find it describes the Spirit

as quite a powerful force. And the disciples we read about in our first reading discovered the same thing. Here they were, eleven unskilled and unqualified guys whose leader had just left them. They were a hopeless lot, doomed to fail. And yet with the arrival of the Holy Spirit to drive them in new directions they began the church. Strength, clarity and boldness came to them in a very real way.

Something similar happens with St. Paul. You may know his story well. He goes from a persecutor of the church to one of its chief evangelists. And it didn't happen easily or sweetly. It was a tough and dramatic conversion.

Today we celebrate the Rite of Confirmation. Three of our youth will be confirmed and go from being child members of this congregation to adult members. They all seemed pretty excited by this prospect when I talked with them last week. And as any sermon on confirmation is sure to include, they know they are not done. Confirmation doesn't mean you are done learning. What it does mean is that when they were baptized their parents and godparents made promises on their behalf - they would raise them in the covenant of their baptism. And now, today, after two years of classes and taking sermon notes, plus a week at confirmation camp - all of this transforming their faith from childlike simplicity to greater maturity - they are ready to take

ownership of their own baptisms. They will take ownership of their relationship with God.

I like to use the image of sailing to understand what this relationship is like. We live in an area where there are a lot of lakes. If you want to go on them you have several choices. You could use a kayak or canoe. In which case you will have to use your own physical strength to move yourself everywhere you go. On the other extreme you could use a motorboat. Then you don't have to exert much of any effort at all. You determine where you want to go, when you want to go, and how fast you go - assuming there's no sheriff's boat nearby to catch you for speeding.

And then of course there is sailing. With a sailboat you do not propel the boat with your own strength. It isn't up to your physical stamina. Nor do you use the strength of a motor, and sit back in laziness. You use a sail to catch the power of the wind. You do not control your power source but you catch it. Now, does that mean you can only go the direction the wind is blowing? Of course not. All sailors know that with proper technique a sailboat can even travel right into the direction of the wind.

Our confirmands will do well to see their confirmation not

as graduation from church, but as the beginning of a life-long sailing journey with God. They will not paddle their way through life on their own strength. Nor will they go through life with a motor effortlessly propelling them along. They enter into an active partnership with God.

Sailing takes effort and it requires paying attention. Sometimes the wind is strong and to your back. And sometimes a life of faith flows along with great ease.

Sometimes you face a headwind. It takes a lot of work to tack up against the wind, constantly turning and resetting the sails. And sometimes accomplishing things through faith feels like it is a tough battle.

Sometimes there is no wind at all. A sailboat just stops. And sometimes it may feel like the wind of the Spirit has abandoned you and you are going nowhere. In those times you need to be patient. For just as the wind certainly picks up again, so does the power of the Spirit. Remember, Jesus said, "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." John 3:8

Sailing also takes a good deal of practice - at least if you

want to be any good at it. I don't know how many of our confirmands had a chance to go sailing when they were at Confirmation Camp, but I hope they all had a chance to get in a boat with Captain Ron - the director of the camp's sailing program. He is as excellent as any sailor ever was. He can catch the lightest breeze with a the sail. He can easily upright a capsized boat. And with a stiff solid wind there have been times when he's raced past motorboats on Lake Chautauqua. He told me once, "You should see the way people look when they see a sailboat overtaking them in their speedboat!" He didn't get that good without practice. He's been doing it his whole life.

My daughter Emma has been sailing with Captain Ron and she wants to do more sailing. So last winter I bought a little sailboat for her to use. Recently one of my neighbors who grew up sailing took Emma and I out to give us some lessons. Now with some thinking and bungling I can usually eventually get the sail to catch the wind and then steer the rudder in the right direction. But I was watching my neighbor as she tried out the little boat. It was as if she and the wind and the boat were all one. She had one hand on the rudder, one hand on the rope controlling the sail all the while fluidly shifting her weight to keep from capsizing while going as fast as possible. That's good sailing.

As a Christian matures in faith he or she becomes equally skilled at catching the wind of the Spirit. It becomes second nature, an unconscious reaction.

Remember that the disciples we read about in the first reading didn't suddenly know everything that Pentecost Day. They grew over time - a long time. There were plenty of failures, and plenty of conflicts, and plenty of setbacks too. But they laid the foundation for the Church.

The Holy Spirit is blowing in and through our lives every moment of every day. It is our energy source, our empowerment. Catch the Spirit and let it take you on adventures far and wide, thrilling ones and peaceful ones, dangerous ones and easy ones. But ultimately all of them leading you to an ever closer connection to our God. Amen