May is a month full of college graduations and commencement speeches—
in fact five years ago from this very weekend,
my husband and I had just attended our daughter’s graduation.
So perhaps it is fitting that my thoughts on the scriptures
for this morning’s sermon were influenced by a commencement speech.
The speech was given by Chris Satullo
who happens to be my daughter’s boss at WHYY—the NPR station of Philadelphia.
He spoke to the graduating class of Rutgers University in Camden.
When my daughter forwarded it to us she wrote that the speech
was very “Fry-esque”—by which she meant that her boss’s speech
made her think of the kind of sermons and sayings of one of our former pastors,
the late Rev. Franklin D. Fry. I agree.
Not only was the speech very accessible, down to earth, and wise
but he even used the “traditional” sermon formula of three points and a story!
All of this set alongside the texts for today
began to make an interesting “stew” of thoughts—
It occurred to me that perhaps a commencement-like sermon was in order
for this morning . . .
that is, if we take seriously the meaning of the word “commencement.”
Now a “commencement” speech is offered when a group of students
have managed to successfully survive four years of college reading, tests, and papers
(among other college “stuff”)
and achieve at the end (ta-dah!) the acknowledgment of a degree.
But, as a good “commencement” speech will do,
it will remind you that graduation is not a destination—its actually a starting place.
A good commencement speech will remind students that this “ending”
is nothing more than, and certainly nothing less than, “the beginning.”
The students have struggled through the past four years
(or more in some cases) to receive the knowledge and skills they need
to be sent to make their way in the world—
but hopefully to use what they have learned not just to make money or get a job
but to make the world in some way better.

All three of Chris Satullo’s pieces of advice for the Rutgers graduates were quite good—at least from a secular point of view.
However, it was third point which gave me a perspective
on all of the scriptures we heard today that grabbed my imagination.
His third piece of wisdom for the graduates and his key piece of wisdom was—and I quote: “Only connect.”

Now you are probably asking yourself—as I did—
what is he talking about?
Here’s what Satullo said: *The butterfly effect is real.*

*This whole thing, all the lives we live all across this watery planet, really do form a web, a shimmering, delicate, infinitely ramifying web of connection.*

Well, now, do you believe that all our lives across the planet are deeply connected, that all lives on the earth are part of a vast web of connection?

Do you believe that your life and my life and the lives of every other person in this time and place who live here in the United States and those who live in Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Palestine, China, Brazil, Mexico, Canada, New Zealand, Nepal, Haiti, Russia . . . all those who live in over 194 nations in the world of the 21st Century are connected?

Not to mention the Romans, the Israelites, the Egyptians, the Parthians, Medes, Elamties, Cappadocians, Cretans and citizens of Mesopotamia of the 1st Century and eons before—that we are connected to all same God, the same Word, the same Spirit who breathed life into them and all of us?

I confess, I do believe that we are deeply connected to one God and to each other—and the outpouring of the gifts of the Spirit on all people is about keeping us connected in life-giving ways.

You could say, we are all a part of one transcendent bloodline.

We can see God’s desire for us to be connected despite our differences by taking notice of those amazing linguistic abilities that connected people across wide divides—not with a single language that everyone could understand, but instead they heard the singular good news of God’s grace in their own language.

In that moment, all the people were one in their hearing, if not their understanding of the deeper meaning of what they heard. Despite their differences, they could all hear what the disciples were saying, each in their own language.

Why didn’t God just make it possible for everyone to speak in just one language (preferably English I’m sure most of you are thinking)?

But it seems that God desires and promotes diversity.

Remember the story of the Tower of Babel?

That ancient story from the book of Genesis reminds us that the different languages of humankind have the power to divide people one from another.

In the ancient world, there was a utopian ideal of one universal language, and this story provides an intriguing take on that dream.

On the day of Pentecost, the creative Spirit of God rushed in to empower many different kinds of people to do something astounding: to communicate effectively with one another.

(Can you imagine such a thing?)

Bridges were built and crossed in a moment, and the differences among them, instead of dividing, provided startling illustration of just how great the creative and reconciling power of God is.
Underneath the differences of nationality and language, there was a fundamental unity—a deep connection—that was not only touched but enlivened and experienced, profoundly, by many who were there.

Of course, there were those who scoffed and interpreted even the most amazing of events through the eyes and ears of cynicism, but those with hearts and minds that were open to the movement of the Spirit knew that a new day had come. Those open hearted and minded people were now deepening their connection—to God and one another.

Here, at the dawn of a new era, on the birthday of a church called to spread to the ends of the earth, the display is for everyone. Not just the disciples, gathered in a room, getting themselves together after Jesus is once again departed. Not just the holiest or the most faithful or the most learned, not just the believers, not just those who were with Jesus on the road or those witnesses to his Resurrection. No, God is pouring out his Spirit on "all flesh," male and female, old and young, slave and free, are invited and included—and not just invited but expected to prophesy and dream, too! And just to make sure that they know they're included, the formidable obstacle of a multitude of languages is overcome by a sweeping wind, an uplifting Spirit that drives those disciples out, out into the world beyond their walls, beyond the theoretical but fragile safety those walls provide.

Out into the world, and compelled to spread the Good News of what God is doing in a new day—it was a day of “commencement”—the beginning, the inauguration, the “birth” of God’s making all things new. So you could say they were connected and then sent out to get others connected.

Yet births are rarely neat, tidy, or quiet, whether it's a human being or "something beautiful struggling to be born." The birth of the church is no different. And let’s not forget that the disciples, cowering and confused, experience their own kind of rebirth or transformation by the power of this Spirit who blows into the scene on the rush of a mighty wind, with great noise and even with fire. But in this case, fire and wind bring not destruction but new life.
As with birth, it may not be quiet or peaceful, but it is exhilarating and, in the end, a very good thing.

We are all in one way or another on the precipice (a commencement) of something new. Whether we approach the end of our lives or expect the birth of a new one, or we float somewhere in between, we each must grapple and ultimately accept that we live in a world of constant change—a world of endings and beginnings. Hence, we all need the Spirit of Pentecost, the Spirit that connects us to God and one another, a connection to the Spirit to lead and guide us through the deviations of life so that we might learn to love all the more—now that sounds like connection to me!

Shane Claiborne, a missionary pastor of the emerging church writes:

Maybe we are a little crazy.

After all, we believe in things we don’t see . . .

We believe poverty can end even though it is all around us.

We believe in peace even though we hear only rumors of war.

And since we are people of expectation, we are so convinced that another is coming that we start living as if it were already here . . .

We believe despite the evidence—and watch the evidence change!

Claiborne says that when we have Spirit-inspired dreams and visions like these, we’re compelled to live differently. We begin living as if poverty were indeed over by living generously. We act now to beat our swords into plowshares, our spears into pruning hooks and learn war no more.

It’s important that we keep seeing and keep dreaming because when we’re completely open to the Spirit that God has already poured out upon us, we see visions and we dream dreams—and we begin to live differently.

*The coming of the Spirit is . . .the beginning of the reunion of the human community.*

I believe it helpful to think of the coming of the Spirit as inaugurating a reconciled diversity, a deep web of connection.

So, now dear friends—all of us who are gathered together in this one place, its time to stop and *take a deep breath.*

No . . . really, I want you to close your eyes, and breathe deeply and slowly. Count to three as you breathe—And pray for the Holy Spirit to fill your heart and mind.

Just take a deep breath and connect,

And let the power of God’s holy breath go to work in your life anew.
This Day of Pentecost affirms for us that God's creative and creating Spirit, God's life-giving breath is still at work around, among, and in us. It is a breath of life, of courage, of proclamation and connection. God’s holy breath can fill our lungs to overflowing, causing us to sing and to dance, to live and get through each day, to begin, to commence again. It is a breath, a connection, a commencement, we do not want to miss. It is a breath, a connection, a new beginning, we want to learn to expect and for which we want to pray. So perhaps you and I will remember to connect and breathe deeply each day. And remind others to connect and breathe deeply of the Spirit.

Let us pray. 
Come, Holy Spirit, fill our lungs, our souls, our lives with your life-giving breath of courage and good news. May our hearts and minds be open and connected to your newness—now and always. Amen.