

Sermon: Pentecost

Mr. Evans DeVries

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Year C

Acts 2:1-21

Psalm 104:25-35, 37

Romans 8:14-17

John 14:8-17, 25-27

Today marks the celebration of Pentecost. I have found that this Holy Day is often ranked third in the hierarchy of the seven most important feasts of our church calendar. If you are like me, you may be already trying to name the rest of the feasts days, so, just for reference, they are: Easter, Ascension Day, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, All Saints' Day, Christmas, and the Epiphany.

Pentecost is celebrated by most Christian denominations. While it seems uncertain when the celebration began, it may have been as early as the first century. For us, Pentecost marks the birth of the Christian church. "Before the first Pentecost occurred, seven weeks after the resurrection of Christ," Rev. Mark Roberts of St. Marks' Presbyterian Church in Bourne TX writes, "There were followers of Jesus, but no movement that could meaningfully be called 'the church'. Thus from an historical point of view, Pentecost is the day on which the church was started. This is also true from a spiritual perspective, since the Spirit brings the church into existence and enlivens it".

The word "pentecost" comes from the Greek language and means "fifty". It was the determiner of the date of the Jewish holiday called Shavuot, or the Festival of Weeks. Leviticus 23:16 sets the date for the next festival which follows Passover to be seven weeks or fifty days after the last day of Passover. This holiday, Shavuot, commemorates Moses receiving the law on Mt. Sinai. As Rev. Roberts says, "This day becomes especially significant for Christians because, seven weeks after the resurrection of Jesus, during the Jewish celebration of Shavuot/Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon his first followers, thus empowering them for their mission and gathering them together as a church."

In our first reading today, Acts 2, we find that the residents of Jerusalem and those who are visiting to worship on Shavuot are seeking to make sense out of the events of the first Pentecost. While the disciples had been forewarned by Jesus of what was coming, the residents and the other Jews gathered from far and wide to celebrate had no idea of what was going on. Some thought, as we heard, that the disciples were drunk, but they were each hearing the message in their own native language. Peter explains to the Jews that what is going on is the fulfillment of the Prophet Joel's predictions. When he is finished, we are told later in Acts 2, some 3,000 people are baptized in Jesus' name and become members of the what has now become the church.

As an aside, in the early church, and in some churches, today, they continue and commemorate this event. For them, Pentecost is a time of baptism and receiving new members. In the English church, because white is the color of baptism, Pentecost came to be called "White Sunday". This, eventually was shortened to "Whitsunday".

If Pentecost is all about the Holy Spirit, what can we say about the gift of Spirit? Brian Peterson, Professor of New Testament at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary notes that Pentecost is treated differently by the author of Luke and Acts. Where John puts the resurrection, the ascension and Pentecost all on the same day, Easter, Luke makes each a separate event. Peterson points out that Luke's narrative is the one adopted by the church and which has shaped its liturgical pattern. He says that is appropriate. These events belong together as a unit, clarifying what God has done for and through Jesus, and that each is spectacular enough to deserve its own day of celebration.

Professor Peterson goes on to say, "It isn't only in terms of narrative chronology that Luke-Acts offers something distinct about the Holy Spirit. There are two other New Testament authors who have a good deal to say about the Spirit, but each of these three voices emphasizes something different. For John, the Spirit is the Advocate, the continuing and comforting presence of Jesus with the church, and the source of peace.

For Paul, the Spirit is that which unites us to Christ, makes us into his body, and gives particular gifts to each person for the sake of the community. For Luke-Acts, the Spirit is the power of God, the mighty burning wind that blows the church into new and unexpected places of ministry.” As one commentator put it, Luke’s version of the Spirit takes you to where the pain is.

Of these three aspects of the spirit, I would like to concentrate on John’s version for the remainder of my time. The versions of Paul and Luke seem less personal to me and more oriented toward the larger church community in terms of mobilizing action from the church at large.

The Advocate, the continuing presence of Christ in our lives, is not quite as straight forward and recognizable as one might think. According to Karoline Lewis, a professor of Preaching at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, among Lutherans, this aspect of the Spirit is known as the “shy member of the Trinity”. She suggests that, “...for you to see the Spirit active in your life, a little focus may be necessary. Not that the Spirit’s presence is dependent on your determination to see it. The Spirit is there whether you want it to be or not.” In today’s gospel reading, Philip and the others had missed the Father’s presence in Christ over the long haul. It must be at least as easy for us to miss the presence of the Spirit in our day-to-day lives. On rare occasions, like the first Pentecost or Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, there’s no mistaking the actions of the Holy Spirit, but the vast majority of the Advocate’s actions are subtle. There are some people who seem to be more sensitive to the workings of the Spirit, but for most of us, most of the time, it can take real work and the afore mentioned focus to discern its presence. I believe that one such spirit-sensitive person was our former interim pastor and rector, Ted Kohl. I was always amazed by how led by the Spirit Pastor Ted was, and by his perception of the working of the Spirit.

I suspect that most of us will probably continue to struggle to recognize the Spirit at work in our lives, especially when things get difficult. I know that I certainly do. But,

when we are troubled, the Advocate that Christ asked the Father to send to us stands quietly with us. As Scott Hoezee of Calvin College's Center for Excellence in Preaching says of troubling times, "... In a world that constantly tries to steal peace from us and in times when our hearts really do become troubled and for powerfully good reasons at that, this is the good news to which we cling: There really can be a peace which passes all understanding. There really can be a way for troubled hearts to become calm again. It may not come through tongues of flame or roaring winds or earthquakes such as you can read about in the lectionary readings for Pentecost, but it can come. It does come."

All that I can add to that is: Come Holy Spirit. Amen.