

May 31, 2009 Pentecost Sermon
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Well, I suppose this better be good, huh? I begin by saying the obvious...today is Pentecost...one of the three most important festivals of the church year...the other two, of course, being Christmas and Easter. But compared to Christmas and Easter, Pentecost is relatively neglected, largely ignored by our culture. I've never seen a Pentecost greeting card, or heard a popular Pentecost song on the radio...I mean...how would it go? (sings) "In your Pentecost bonnet, with tongues of fire upon it..." (laughter)

When I was growing up, it was common to refer to Pentecost as the birthday of the church. And, I've been in churches that have decorated the sanctuary with balloons on Pentecost, and then served birthday cake in the fellowship hall afterwards. Well, yes...but Pentecost is about much more than that. It's about the coming of the Spirit upon the followers of Jesus. Not just any spirit, but the Spirit of Jesus. It's about the return, and the continuing presence, of the Spirit of Jesus.

Pentecost has a history in the Jewish tradition, before it became a Christian festival. It was one of the three great Jewish pilgrimage festivals, celebrated fifty days after Passover--and that's where Pentecost gets its name. "Pente" cost--meaning fifty. And, within the Jewish tradition, it celebrated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, and the formation of the Jewish community around that--around its covenant with God.

And the same kind of thing happens in the first Christian Pentecost. The story of the first Christian Pentecost is found, as you know, in the second chapter of the Book of Acts. And you've just heard it read to you. And, as the author of Acts tells the story, it is the fulfillment of the promise that Jesus made to his followers in the first chapter of Acts. And the promise, is actually the final words of Jesus, spoken just before he ascended into Heaven. And the promise--to quote Acts 1:8 exactly--goes like this: The ascending Christ says to his followers: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." And then it continues with a virtual roadmap with the Book of Acts. "And you will be my witnesses, in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." And then, the author of Acts tell us: "Having spoken these words, Jesus was lifted up, and taken out of their sight."

Pentecost is the fulfillment of that promise. And as we turn to the story in the second chapter of Acts, don't worry about whether the language of the story is meant to be historically factual, or whether it's meant metaphorically and symbolically. The point of the story is its meaning. And metaphor, and symbol, convey meaning. The followers of Jesus are gathered together in a house in Jerusalem. They have been waiting...waiting for the promised Spirit. And now it happens. They hear a sound like the rush of a wild wind...to quote the text: "and suddenly, from the sky there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house." Then tongues of fire appear upon their heads...to quote the text once again: "divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them. And a tongue of fire rested on each of them."

The associations of this language are rich: wind and fire. In the Bible--in both Hebrew and Greek--the same word is used for wind, breath, and spirit. The Spirit is like the wind outside of us, and the breath inside of us. The Spirit is all around us. And the word "fire" in the Bible, is frequently associated with the presence of God, the presence of the sacred. Think of the burning bush, in the story of the Exodus. That bush, filled with a brilliant, burning radiance, that burns without being consumed. And then the Pillar of Fire that guided the Israelites through the wilderness. Fire is about the presence of the Spirit, the presence of God.

And then, filled with the Spirit, Jesus' followers speak in many languages, so that Jewish pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem from all over the Mediterranean world, heard them in their own language. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Cappadocians, Judeans, Phrygians, Panphylans, Egyptians, Libyans. Romans, Cretans, and Arabs--it almost leaves you breathless. And let me note, in passing, that this is very different from the speaking in tongues referred to, in some of Paul's letters. and practiced by some charismatic Christians. Their speaking in tongues is unintelligible speech--the language of inspired prayer. But in this story in Acts, this isn't about tongues as unintelligible speech. This is about universally understandable language. **Everybody** understands them. And in this detail, we hear an echo of the story of the Tower of Babel, in the opening chapters of Genesis--it's in Genesis 11--at the very end of that mythical prologue to the Book of Genesis. And, you remember the story, I think: human beings still all speak one language...and they began to build a tower that is to reach up to Heaven...and then, God--shocked by their hubris--destroys the tower, and scatters humankind into its different linguistic groups, and its different nations. And the human community is fragmented... The universal languages of Pentecost, are the reversal of Babel--the beginning of the restoration of the fragmented human community.

To reflect now for a moment, on the meaning of this story as a whole... Pentecost is about the return of Christ...the Spirit of Christ...the Spirit of Jesus...the Spirit that was present in Jesus...the return of Spirit that his followers had known in him, and around him, during his lifetime. And the result of the coming of the Spirit, upon this community, was that the Jesus movement was reborn. It came into existence anew, and this happened through the Spirit of Christ. This is the birth of the church...the revitalization of his followers...the re-animation of his followers... And I note in passing, that the root of the word animation, is "anima." In Latin, an "anima" is the Latin word for spirit. The re-animation of his followers is the "re-spiriting" of his followers.

And this is what early Christianity was about. Early Christian communities were about living ever more deeply into the Spirit of Christ. They were spirit-filled communities, but also communities living into that Spirit. To use phrases from Paul: "These were communities of becoming in Christ, of putting on Christ, of dying and rising with Christ. To be in Christ is to live into the Spirit of Christ."

And Pentecost is also about us today. It is about the continuing coming of the Spirit, the presence of the Spirit of Christ in our midst today. And it is an invitation to live more deeply into that Spirit. It is about our revitalization, our re-animation. What would it mean for the Spirit to come upon the church today? Now, of course, it is always pre-

sent. But what would it mean for it to come more fully on us, as church...on us as the Christian community in this place today. What might it mean for us to live more deeply into the Spirit of Christ? And as I reflect on that question, let me share with you some of my perceptions of Trinity.

I've been here 16 years, as long as Marianne. And I'm very grateful for this community, and what it has meant for me. We do many things well here, and my basis for comparison is that I've been in over 200 congregations for their Sunday morning worship over the last dozen years or so, in my life on the road. And I want you to know that Trinity does the 10:00 worship service, as well as any church I've been to, with only one or two potential equals. We are a large and growing congregation, and you're good folks. I like you. And yet, I have a sense that we can be much more as a Christian community. Please don't hear that as a criticism--it's a compliment. And an invitation. It's about potential. And the invitation and the potential, is to live more deeply into the Christian life. Into life centered in the Spirit--the Spirit of Jesus. I think most of us--probably all of us--yearn for that. Or we wouldn't be here. Or we certainly wouldn't be here with any frequency.

And as I talk about life in the Spirit for a few minutes, it seems to me that it has three primary components. It's about spiritual formation, educational formation, and ethical formation. It's about Christian formation--about the shaping of us. And these three kinds of formation are not separate, like watertight or airtight compartments. Rather, they interconnect and overlap in many ways.

To say a few words about educational formation... The Christian tradition, including the Bible as its foundation, is extraordinarily rich. But, it has oftentimes been domesticated and impoverished by conventional understandings. In our time, these conventional understandings--the common Christianity of a generation or two ago, and still with us--have become intellectual obstacles to many people. For many who have left the church, for many within the church, and for many who have never been part of a church. They are obstacles to taking religion, and God, and Christianity seriously. But the Christian tradition is far more diverse, and insightful, than much of common Christianity has made it out to be. There is extraordinary wealth and wisdom here. And so, educational formation is about two things. It means learning about the Christian tradition. And it also means learning about the ways it often differs from its common Christian expressions.

And then there's spiritual formation... The foundation of this notion, is the foundation of Christianity, that the Christian life is primarily about a relationship with God. It's not primarily about believing certain things for the sake of salvation later. It's primarily about a relationship with God, with God as known especially in Jesus. The Christian life is about becoming conscious of, and intentional about, a deepening relationship with God. And how does that happen? How do we pay attention to our relationship with God? In the same ways that we pay attention to a human relationship. By spending time in it. And this means that spiritual formation is about practice, and you can learn about Christian spiritual practices here.

Now, spiritual formation most often includes educational, as well as ethical formation. And so I turn for a moment or two, to ethical formation. Now when I talk about ethical formation, I don't mean ethics, in the sense of a set of rules, or as a way of dividing "good" people from "bad" people. We're all kind of "bad," you know... That's my Lutheran background coming out. But, you know, the Episcopal confession of sin is reasonably rigorous as well. I guess we simply say "the manifold misdeeds which we, from time to time, have committed"...it's an occasional faux-pas... But back to the main point. Ethics is not about sorting out the good people from the bad people. Rather, when I use the word ethics, I mean the ethos, within which we live. The word ethics comes from the Greek word ethos, which in turn means "the home of being." I love that phrase. It's wonderfully evocative. I'm not even sure I have a clue as to what it means. But ethics--ethos--is about the "home of being." I think it was Martin Heidigger who said that (though if that matters to you, check it out on Google before you quote him). Now to apply that--our ethos as American Christians, is two-fold. We have been formed by two stories, two cultures. We have all been formed by modern Western culture, most of us in its modern American form, by the American story--its understandings and perceptions, its vision of life, its values, its yearnings, and its fears. And, we have also to varying degrees, been formed by the Christian story. And there are significant differences between these two. It's not impossible to reconcile them, but it is important to be aware of how different these two stories are. To be Christian is be formed differently. To paraphrase Thoreau in words that have almost become cliché--being Christian does mean walking to the beat of a different drummer.

This kind of formation, it seems to me, is the purpose of Trinity. It is its reason for existence, to continue what began at Pentecost. And that means continuing what began with Jesus. And this congregation provides many opportunities to do so. And so I invite you: become curious...become curious about the fullness of the Christian life...be more and more intentional about a deeper centering in the Spirit...the Spirit of God as known in Jesus. This is what Pentecost is about. Pentecost is about the abiding presence of the Spirit of Christ in our midst. It's not just the birthday of the church. It's about our rebirth, our rebirth in and through the Spirit of Christ.