

THE CONNECTING POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

(05/31/2020)

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 11:1-9
 Acts 2:1-21
 John 14:15-17

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. . . . You know him, because he abides in you, and he will be in you.” (John 14:15-17)

Today is the seventh Sunday after Easter (the eighth Sunday of the Easter season). It also is the twelfth Sunday that, because of the restrictions on public gatherings during the coronavirus pandemic, we have not been able to meet as the gathered church for Sunday morning worship.

Today is also Pentecost Sunday, the celebration of the transforming and inspiring experience of the Holy Spirit by the disciples that occurred fifty days after Easter. It marks the end of the liturgical season of Easter.

The term "Pentecost" has several connotations. Some celebrate it as the birthday of the church, marked by the changing of the liturgical color from white to red, the color of special ecclesiastical celebrations, e.g., Reformation Day and ordinations. Others picture charismatic worship services in the tradition of the Holy Rollers, the Holy Jumpers, or the Holy Screamers. Still others associate it with the phenomenon of glossolalia, where people who have received the gift of tongues speak a strange and ancient language, a language that can be understood only by those who have received the gift of interpretation of tongues.

I have never spoken in tongues, nor have I ever witnessed the phenomenon of glossolalia, having spent all of my religious life within the mainline Protestant church. I have no doubt, however, that this phenomenon does exist and that it is meaningful. A friend of mine told me just this past week that she has experienced it, and that she would describe it as a special kind of prayer, a deep kind of prayer. After all is said and done, however, I agree with the apostle Paul when he says that it is better to speak a few words that instruct or enlighten than many words in an ancient or sacred language which only a select few can understand.

The theme of communication, of connection, of overcoming barriers was a vital part of that first Pentecostal experience. Pentecost, by the way, is not a uniquely Christian holiday. Pentecost is the Greek name for the Hebrew Feast of Weeks. The festival of Pentecost, also known as the Festival of Harvest or the Day of First Fruits, took place at the end of the Hebrew

reaping season. For the Hebrews, the reaping season was forty-nine days, a "week of weeks." It ended with the one-day celebration of the Festival of Weeks at the central sanctuary. Everyone was expected to be there.

The small band of Jesus' followers, who were apparently still Jewish in their religious observances, was present and gathered at this celebration. Suddenly they became aware of the presence of the Spirit of the risen Christ. They heard a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, and tongues of fire settled upon their heads. This is why two of the symbols of the Holy Spirit are wind and fire. The disciples had never experienced anything like this before. They found themselves speaking to people of different lands, different dialects and traditions, and somehow, miraculously, these people understood. The disciples were "caught up in the Spirit."

This was not the first time the disciples had experienced the presence of the risen Christ. The risen Christ came to them in the form of Jesus immediately following the Resurrection. These encounters convinced them that Jesus still lived and kept them from disbanding. But between those experiences and the Day of Pentecost, it is recorded that they did absolutely nothing.

It seems to me that the post-resurrection appearances of the Risen Christ were still basically an experience of Jesus. In these encounters, the disciples see Jesus, talk with him, and eat with him. Through these experiences, they realize that Jesus has risen, that he is Lord of all, and that they, as his apostles, have a mission. But Jesus is still separate, still not a part of them. He always leaves them, departs from them, vanishes from their midst.

The Pentecostal experience of the risen Christ is different, for it is a personal, individual, inner experience. No one, not even the disciples, saw the outward bodily form of Jesus that day, only the tongues of flame. The disciples experience the risen Christ not in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, but as an intense inner experience. They experience the Spirit as a presence that empowers them to preach and to heal. Immediately following this experience, Peter and John heal a man lame from birth. The disciples experience the presence of the indwelling power of the risen Christ, just as Saul later experiences it on the road to Damascus. This experience marks the birthday of the church.

The crowd, unable to understand the disciples' experience, accuses them of being drunk. Peter responds to this charge by pointing out that they did, in fact, communicate. Everyone

knows that drunks do not communicate well; they have an especially difficult time listening and understanding the point of view of others. In this Pentecostal experience, bonds are established between the disciples and people of foreign lands. They experience the connecting power of understanding.

The Spirit of God does not divide--it unites. It unites through empathy and love, which are the deepest forms of communication.

This is how we can judge the gifts of the Spirit. A person under the influence of the Holy Spirit would not preach *at* someone, but rather would *communicate* with that person. Communication involves attentive and respectful listening. The miracle of Pentecost is as much in the hearing as it is in the speaking. It was not the sound that came out of the disciples' mouths that was the miracle; it was the bonds of communication and understanding that were established, bonds which overcame what seemed to be impassible barriers.

God knows we need this experience today as we have never needed it before! Nations are alienated from nations because of differing political and economic systems, making it difficult for us to work toward common goals in the betterment of our earth. Segments of our own population are alienated by class-consciousness, racial prejudice, and homophobia. Following George Floyd's murder, whites are finally beginning to listen to Blacks, are beginning to realize the many and varied forms of prejudice and discrimination, micro- and macro-aggressions that Blacks experience on a regular basis. Marriages suffer from a breakdown in communication, and parents find themselves unable to communicate with their children. The obstacles to love, to genuine community, seem overwhelming. At times, the forces, the demonic powers that seek to divide us seem more powerful than the forces, the energies that are working to unite us.

We need to experience the unifying, connecting energy of the Holy Spirit to help us transcend our differences and weave a beautiful fabric out of the diversity in our society and our world. If our church is truly inspired by the Holy Spirit, it will bring a healing word and it will also serve as an example to our society. I think our church does this.

In the Old Testament story of the Tower of Babel, people of one tongue, one language come together, but pride disperses them. Their grandiose plans break down. In a confusion of languages, they are scattered.

Pentecost is the Gospel's answer to the Tower of Babel. At Babel, the spirit of pride divides God's children. At Pentecost, the Spirit of Christ unites them. The Tower of Babel teaches us that pride separates and alienates. Pentecost proclaims that the Holy Spirit unites, heals, and restores. Across the gaps and chasms of time, Pentecost calls to each of us, "Let the Spirit help you share with one another, listen to one another, communicate with one another, and understand."

An anonymous author once wrote a line of poetry that pertains to the healing power of eternal life:

*A rest for broken things
too broke to mend.*

There is a healing that takes place after death, but the Spirit of God brings healing, brings rest and mending in this life as well. The Spirit of God leads us to new creation. Wherever love is present, the Holy Spirit is at work. Wherever the removal of a barrier helps people to find themselves and each other, the Holy Spirit is present. Wherever new life arises out of the ashes of death and healing bridges the chasm of alienation and brokenness, the Holy Spirit is present. Whenever we reach out to each other in answer to the invitation of Christ and create new ways of living with each other, the Holy Spirit creates a Pentecost once again.

This is what the church is all about--a search for connection and communion. We need to understand what happened thousands of years ago, but we also need to be open to our own experience of Pentecost today. We need to experience the Holy Spirit who dwells both within and among us. We need to embrace diversity within our church, our nation, and the world.

To remember Pentecost is not only to revive the memory of the risen Christ, but also to empower it, to strengthen not only our hope but also our resolve to experience wholeness within ourselves and within the world.

If we are to experience Pentecost, we need to be open to the Holy Spirit who alone can make that hope a reality.

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