



“Pentecost for the People”

Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21

***What a big day—Pentecost
The church is born and we are reborn***

I wonder if Pentecost has an inferiority complex. After all, it is one of the three big days of the Christian calendar. Christmas gets more than its share of attention.¹ Easter, the biggest day of all, may not get as much attention as Christmas but at least it gets the giant crowds in the pews. But Pentecost . . . alas, no crowds, no special services, little more than just another Sunday.

This year of the pandemic, we have talked a great deal about the Church, this unified fellowship that God has created and of which we are all part. We are who we have always been—and yet, we are different. Pentecost marks the birth of the Church. Until Pentecost, Jesus’ disciples were a group of believers striving to understand what had happened and where this Jesus movement was headed next; but they were not the Church. Until Pentecost, the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would be sent by the Father after Jesus’ departure (see John 15), had not arrived. Until Pentecost, the disciples were simply waiting. In fact, God’s people had been waiting for the Spirit of God for a very long time.

The Spirit’s return?

When Acts 2 opens, Jesus’ disciples have gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks—the second of three major Jewish festivals, held between Passover (in early spring) and Tabernacles (in the fall). The city is packed, with the population having swelled to perhaps 150,000 people. Jews are there from all over the Roman Empire. In the weeks before the festival, the disciples had been with the resurrected Jesus, who before returning to the Father had told the disciples that they were to remain in Jerusalem to wait for the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had explained that God’s Spirit would come upon them with power so that they could be Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and “to the ends of the earth” (see Acts 1).

One can only imagine the anticipation and, perhaps, anxiety the disciples felt. Only weeks before, they had been cowering in an upstairs room waiting to be rounded up by the Roman soldiers after Jesus’ crucifixion. But Jesus had passed through death. His resurrection had changed everything. They didn’t know what to expect, but they wouldn’t have to wait long to find out what was in store for them. As Luke tells it, they were gathered together when “from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind . . . Divided tongues, as of fire . . . rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages” (from today’s passage). As Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit had returned with power. *Returned??*

Ever since the flight from Egypt more than a millennium before Christ, God had been present with his people in a way that he was not present elsewhere. Indeed, God’s dwelling place had been the temple in Jerusalem. But God’s people had been unable to live as they should in the presence of God. Consequently, God’s presence had departed the temple, “Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house . . .” (Ezekiel 10:18). God’s Holy Spirit is God’s empowering presence. Thus, when God was no longer present with his people as he had been, it meant that God’s Spirit had left.

Yet, though God would no longer dwell in the temple with his people, God had not forever abandoned them. God promised that one day he would put within them a new Spirit, replacing their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (see Jeremiah 31). In essence, God promised that he would one day return to his temple (Malachi 3:1). Now, as the disciples sat together during Pentecost, that day had come. But it would not be as they expected. They would be God’s temple, collectively and individually (e.g. 1 Cor. 3:16- 17).

At last

After Jesus’ ascension (his return to the Father), the believers returned to Jerusalem to wait. There, they stayed together and devoted themselves to prayer (see Acts 1:12-26). They also had to restore the circle of Jesus’ closest disciples to

¹ Interestingly, based on the evidence we have, it seems that Christmas wasn’t even celebrated by Christians until at least 200 years after Jesus. The early Christians were Easter people.

twelve by replacing Judas Iscariot. Just as there were originally twelve tribes of Israel, the inner circle of disciples had to be twelve, representing the restored Israel. So they cast lots (rolled dice!)² and Matthias was added to make twelve again.

The believers prayed and waited, but I wonder what they thought would happen next. Jesus had said that the Father would send them the Spirit, who would teach them everything and remind them of what Jesus had said (John 14:26). Whatever the believers imagined, I doubt it quite measured up to the dramatic reality of that Pentecost day.

The believers were all in one place on that day. It was early, about 9am. Suddenly, there was the sound of a huge wind and tongues of fire leapt from believer to believer. These were theophanies, dramatic manifestations of God. God was suddenly with them in a way that God had not been with them before.

The Spirit, God-present, then gave each believer the ability to proclaim God in languages they couldn't know. It would be like me suddenly preaching Sunday's sermon in Russian. What they said wasn't gibberish; rather, it was the undoing of the multiplicity of languages following God's destruction of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). It signified the restoration of God's creation, which God had already accomplished in Christ though it was not yet fully consummated.

Peter, now empowered and led by the Spirit, then rose to speak to everyone within shouting distance. You can bet that the commotion caused by the believers and their astonishing language skills had drawn a big crowd from the throngs in Jerusalem for the festival. Peter began by invoking the words of the prophet of Joel, for what was happening that morning was not merely a fulfillment of what Jesus had promised the disciples, it was a fulfillment of the story told by Scripture. Indeed, God in the persons of Jesus and the Spirit, had stepped into space and time to restore and renew his creation, as God had promised he would do. The Day of the Lord had arrived. It might not have looked like what everyone imagined it would but God's victory over sin and death had been won, shaking the cosmos to its very core.

And so the Church was born, a fellowship created and empowered by the Holy Spirit. But there is more, the Spirit dwells in every believer and is both the evidence of God's work in our lives, now and for all eternity.

God's Colonies

The Roman Empire was like none that had come before. Controlling an empire that stretched from the British Isles to the Euphrates river was difficult for the Roman governors, even with the Roman legions available. One strategy Rome used to extend its influence, particularly in the border regions, was to establish Roman colonies, often populated with retired veterans from the legions. For example, Corinth in Greece was destroyed by the Romans in one century but then rebuilt as a colony in the next.

The administration of these colonies was modeled on Rome's government. The laws were Roman laws. The citizens of these colonies were Roman citizens with all the attendant privileges. The colonists did not expect to return to Rome when their work was done. They were there to consolidate and extend Rome's empire. They were there to stay.

For Paul and the early Christians, every new Christian community, every house church that they formed, was a colony of God's kingdom. It was to be governed by God's law. The members of the community were citizens of heaven. They were there to consolidate and extend God's kingdom. They were there to be the light to the world and a witness to God's love and ongoing work in the world.

The Christians who made up these communities were not merely people who had come together to do good work for others or to enjoy each other's fellowship, though there was plenty of both. The Christians had been born of water and the Spirit (see John 3). They were the ones upon whom the ends of the ages had come (1 Corinthians 10:11). They stood at the very point in time at which God had broken into history in the person of Jesus. In Paul's letters to these churches, he very often grabs them by the metaphorical collar, hoping to make them realize who they really are and who had brought them together.

We, at First UMC, are no less one of God's colonies. We too are citizens of heaven called by God for a purpose. And, frankly, that purpose is *not* about making ourselves into happier people. We are God's colonists so that we might, in Peter's words, "proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

² The casting of lots put the decision in God's hands so far as the believers were concerned.