

## **“Pentecost And You”**

Dear friends, Greetings (once again) as we gather to remember and celebrate the Day of Pentecost.

To get us going today, knowing I run the risk of over-stating what might be actually the case, I believe it's fair to say that Pentecost could easily be called the “Not-So-Well-Remembered-in-the-World” celebration of the Church. Of the three major celebrations we have (throughout the year), this is the one that often (in the eyes of the world) goes unnoticed.

The other two (as you know) are major celebrations (in the world), even though their meaning is often lost. Christmas is as big as it gets. The world has latched on to that celebration in a big way. And Easter is also recognized and remembered, even though it's not always for the right reasons.

But it's not so with the Day of Pentecost. Pentecost, in the eyes of the world, (for the most part), goes unnoticed. If you were to ask the average person (on the street) the significance of this day, I would be surprised if there were many (if any) who could (or would) make the connection.

But as “unnoticed” and “not-so-well-remembered” as it is, today we do remember and celebrate a day that in many ways (for us and for the world) is equally (if not more) important than the other two. Were it not for Pentecost, the message of Jesus and his (birth in the world) might have never been heard beyond those first generations. Were it not for the coming of the Holy Spirit, the message of Christ and what God has done for us (on the cross), might have died off before it had a chance to take root and grow. And were it not for Pentecost, the Church (as we know it today) may never have started and you and I may well not be gathered together as we are today.

But it did happen. Pentecost took place. The Holy Spirit was given. And the Church of Jesus Christ in this world (ever since) has been given the power, the authority, and the responsibility of telling the world of what God (through his only Son) has accomplished for us.

What I want us to do today is to talk about the significance of this day, not only for the early church (long ago), but for the 21<sup>st</sup> century church here today. And in doing so, I want us to think about not only what it means for us together (as a church family), but what it also means for us, individually, as followers of Jesus.

“Pentecost and You.” Let's talk for a few moments about what happened (on that first Pentecost) and how (what happened) is set in the larger context of what was happening in that day. If you remember the sequence of events, it was fifty days after Easter. It was a celebration of what was called “The Feast of Weeks” or the “Festival of the Harvest.” People from the surrounding regions of Jerusalem had gathered to celebrate the blessing of the harvest they had been given.

Ten days prior was the day of Jesus' ascension. We heard that story last week. The story of how Jesus went back (into heaven) to be with his Father, and of how, before he ascended, he told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit.

That's when it happened. On the fiftieth day, the “Festival of the Harvest,” ten days after Jesus' ascension, the disciples waiting as they were told, the Holy Spirit was sent, the disciples were empowered, and the Christian Church began. In Acts chapter two, that's where the context of the story of Pentecost is found.

Now, let me ask you a question. (And it has to do with the context in which the story is placed.) Do you remember who wrote the book of Acts? (It's not a trick question.) It was Luke. He was a physician, a Gentile, the same one who wrote the gospel (by the same name).

In fact, I've often thought it would be a lot simpler (to follow) if the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were not separated (in the Bible) as they are (with the gospel of John in between), because the book of Acts picks up where the gospel of Luke leaves off. And the parallels between the two are significant.

Remember the story? (There are tremendous parallels.) Chapter one (in the gospel of Luke), we find the angel appearing to Mary, telling her that “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” Chapter one (in the book of Acts), the disciples are told to wait in Jerusalem and “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.”

Chapter two (in Luke's gospel), it's the birth of Jesus. In Acts (chapter two) it's the birth of the Christian Church. In Luke, John the Baptist tells the people that the one who is coming will "baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire." In Acts, it happens (on the Day of Pentecost) just as John had said. In Luke, it's the Spirit who descends upon Jesus at his baptism, empowering him for his ministry. In Acts, the Spirit descends on the disciples and empowers them to preach and teach in the name of Christ. In Luke, Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about what they would say, and in the book of Acts, time after time after time, the Holy Spirit gives them just the right words.

Tremendous parallels between the two accounts. (It's fascinating to follow.) And so what's the point? The point is that the Holy Spirit hasn't been sitting around, waiting for the Day of Pentecost (to come) to begin his work. No, the Holy Spirit has been working throughout all of history, teaching people about God, drawing people to faith, guiding and leading them to Christ, and he continues to do the same today.

"Pentecost and You." There are all kinds of lessons in this story from which we can learn and apply in our lives. The story begins with the disciples in Jerusalem. On that first Pentecost, Peter was the preacher, but the emphasis was on the community of faith. (It says), "They were all together in one place. Tongues (as of fire) rested on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they all began to speak in other tongues."

I always give a "hats off" to our readers on this weekend, asked to read the names of the places from which the people (that day) had come: Parthians and Medes and Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia. Luke gives us the names (of those countries) to give us an idea of how far-reaching that first Pentecost was.

From there, he goes on to tell us what happened. He says the disciples began to speak in tongues "as the Spirit enabled them." And he says (when the people heard it), "they were amazed, because each one heard them speaking in their own language."

Now, let me ask you another question. It's the Day of Pentecost, the day when the Holy Spirit empowered those (first disciples) to speak and proclaim the message of Jesus. And when they did, the Holy Spirit took their words and put them (into words) that those around them could hear and understand.

You tell me. Do you think what the Holy Spirit (did for them) back then is possible for the Holy Spirit to do (for you) today? Do you think what made their words understandable to the people when they were (first shared) is something the Holy Spirit can make happen (through your words) when they're shared even now?

It's incredible how God can use our words, even when they don't come easy. I've seen it in my own life as a preacher, many times, (over the course of my ministry), how God can take the words (I share) and use them for his purposes. And, honestly, sometimes those words come easy and it's natural. Other times, it's hard to find them and to know exactly what to say. But, without fail, God takes those words, they pass through the Holy Spirit, and they end up changing lives. In a language that's understood. With a message that leads people to Christ.

Now, let me tell you something. (And here's the secret to Pentecost.) God is in the communications business. (He is.) And he's good at what he does, (light years ahead of) the communication companies we find today. God has been communicating from the beginning of time. And he uses people to speak to people. And he takes their words (even if they're not sure what to say) and translates them into a message that's understood.

Many people think it's my job/our job (as preachers) to tell the world about Jesus. And, on the one hand, it is. (It's our calling.) We work hard at doing what we do. And we trust that the Spirit is at work.

But it wasn't just Peter (as a preacher) who was used on the Day of Pentecost. It was the disciples, every one of those (that day) who considered themselves to be among the followers of Christ.

And so, (again), you tell me. Do you consider yourself a follower of Jesus? Do you think of yourself as one whose witness can be used? God is the communications business (even today), and he can use your life to say (what he has to say) to a world that needs to hear it, if you give him a chance.

As preachers, we get the chance (to preach here) on the weekend, and it's a privilege. It really is. Pastor Joanna and I are part of a privileged group. In contrast, you get the chance to talk to people (throughout the week) that (she and I) will never see, and it's a privilege for you as well.

Maybe it's at school with that friend who has never gone to church, and all they have are questions. Maybe it's at work with that colleague (who used to go) but who now never does, and simply needs a word of encouragement. Maybe it's with your neighbor. Maybe it's with someone in your family.

It doesn't matter who it is or where it happens. God used the witness (of those first disciples) to share the message of Jesus. And God will use your witness as you open your life to be used (by the Holy Spirit) to touch and to change lives.

"Pentecost and You." Go down the list of the names (the Bible gives) for the Holy Spirit. (We've talked about this before.) He's the Counselor. He's the Comforter. He's our Guide. He's our Helper, our Advocate. He's the one who is always by our side.

I find great comfort in those names of the Spirit, because they are accurate descriptions of what the Spirit does for us. When I need a Counselor, the Spirit is there. When I need comfort or guidance (in my life), I know where and (to whom) to turn, without fail. In the same way, I find great encouragement in those names of the Spirit, because they are accurate descriptions of the work (and the witness) the Spirit can do through us.

Go down the list. The Spirit as Counselor? You may not think you have much good counsel to offer to someone who needs advice. And if you give them your (own advice), it's hard to know the benefit. (I wouldn't want to guess.) But if your counsel points them to Jesus (and to what he has to say) and to what God has done for us, the Spirit will take that counsel and change a life.

The Spirit as Comforter? We all have times when we need comfort. And we've all (had times) when we've been able to comfort someone else. Don't ever think that your words to a friend, at a time when they're struggling, will get lost and be worth little. Even little words, shared in the name of Jesus, can offer great comfort when taken (and used) by the Spirit.

It's the same thing with the Spirit as a Guide. There's a lot of guidance in the world and there is no shortage of people willing to offer it. But there's one who can guide us into what's right and what's true and what (ultimately works), and he can use you to offer that guidance to (someone else), if you point them (through the Spirit) to Christ.

The Spirit as Helper and Advocate and Friend? I don't want to belabor the point, but the Spirit can use you in each (and all of) those differing ways. Helping people to see, advocating for them in prayer, and simply being a friend in the (name of the one) who has befriended every sinner who has ever lived. He can do it in you and for you and through you, if you give the Spirit a chance.

It's interesting, even though times have changed, (in our world) since the time of that first Pentecost. You talk with people today and they want to get in touch with the spiritual side of life. They want inspiration in life. It's interesting, (even though times have changed), because the word "spiritual" comes from the same word as the word "inspire." And the word "inspire" comes from the same word (used in the book of Acts) to describe what happened on that first Pentecost.

Luke says there was a "sound like a mighty wind, and it filled the house, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit." He says they were "inspired." They were "breathed into." They were filled with the Holy Spirit and they were used in spiritual ways.

Now, take that idea and apply it to the church today, (apply it to your life). Where it needs to start is with the Spirit. Where it needs to begin is with being "breathed into" and "inspired" by God.

There was an interesting story, (a while back), maybe you heard it, about a group of explorers in a remote part of Africa who came upon something they couldn't figure out. In a cleared out space (in the middle of the jungle) they found 35 carefully laid fires (ready to go) that had never been lit.

They were perfectly formed little tepees, with dry leaves, small sticks, and larger pieces of wood carefully put into place (standing tall). But who built them? And why had not even one been lit?

The mystery was solved when they discovered dozens of chimpanzees watching from the trees. These little chimps, (smart little animals) had evidently watched campers (over the years) who had stopped in that clearing and built fires. And they had copied the art of building a fire. But they had no fire. And so there stood these tepees, ready to be lit, but never able to do that for which they were built.

My friends, the same thing can happen in the church, if we forget why it is we were built, (what God has called us to be about). The world needs Jesus today, as much (if not more), than any other time in history. And you and I have been brought together in this place for the sole purpose of lifting up the name of Christ. But if we forget who we are (and why we are here), then we might as well be a bunch of chimpanzees (sitting in the trees), because we'll never be able to do that for which we were built.

And so let's close today with something a bit different. You should have all picked up one of the candles as you came into church this morning. If you don't have one, raise your hand and the ushers will make sure you do.

What I want us to do for the next few minutes is to use these candles as a reminder of the flames of fire that were there on that first Pentecost and that led people to faith in Jesus, and to remind ourselves that the same power is available for us today.

So I'm going to be lighting this first candle from the altar, and then we're going to be lighting the candles throughout the sanctuary until every candle is lit. One candle at a time, lighting the one next to you where you've seated. (Try not to let the wax from your candle end up anyone or anything that's not good.)

We're also going to be sharing in a song that reminds us of the Spirit's presence and the Spirit's power and the calling we have to allow the Spirit to shine in and through us.

Feel free to join in singing as we light our candles, and/or praying for God's Spirit to work in and through you. Maybe there's a relationship that needs repair. God's Spirit can work to restore it. Maybe there's a challenge you're facing or an opportunity that exists. God's Spirit can help you face it or explore it or guide you where you need.

Maybe it's in your marriage. Maybe it's with someone in your family. Maybe it's nothing more than wanting to know (more clearly) what God wants you to do.

Whatever it is, let's use this time (as we sing and pray) to allow the Holy Spirit to do his work in us...