

THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT PENTECOST SUNDAY

(05/23/10)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 12:4-11
Acts 2:1-8, 12-17
John 14:15-17, 25-26

“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (1 Cor. 12:7)

Today is Pentecost, the day we celebrate as the birthday of the Christian church. As I mentioned last week, because it is one of the great celebrations of the Christian year, the liturgical color is red. Red is reserved for special occasions in the life of the church such as ordinations, installations, and Reformation Sunday. Roman Catholics, however, do not celebrate Reformation Sunday. I will have to check with some of my priest friends on this, but I believe their liturgical color for that day is black. Just kidding! Anyway, Pentecost is a special day in our church year.

The word “pentecost” in Greek, the original language of the New Testament, means “fiftieth.” In the Old Testament, or the Hebrew scriptures, this observance was known as the Feast or Festival of Weeks. In Exodus 34:22, it is defined as the festival of “the first fruits of wheat harvest.” This indicates that the festival was originally an occasion to show gratitude to God for the first fruits, i.e., the early harvest of wheat.

Around the time of Jesus, Pentecost began to be associated more with the religious history of the Hebrew people than with the agricultural seasons. It was designated as the day when the Hebrews celebrated the giving of Torah, the Ten Commandments, to Moses on Mount Sinai. The fifty days was then taken to be the interval between the Passover in Egypt and the arrival of the Israelites at Mount Sinai, though I suspect the journey through the wilderness actually took a lot longer than that.

In the Christian tradition, Pentecost is also associated with the number fifty. It is observed fifty days after Easter. Seven was a magic number for the ancients. The ancients were aware of seven heavenly bodies. This is why we have seven days in our

week. So the number fifty, the day after seven weeks of seven days, was the symbol of a new beginning.

This morning I would like us to think about the disciples' experience at Pentecost as a new beginning. I believe it was the moment when the disciples became apostles, when they were transformed from being followers of Jesus to missionaries, carriers of the gospel to the world in word and deed. This task, which was bequeathed to them by Jesus, was accompanied by the bestowing of gifts. These are called the gifts of the Spirit. Through these gifts the disciples were strengthened for their mission.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul describes the spiritual gifts that are bestowed on the followers or apostles of Christ by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us that God has given us certain gifts, strengths, talents, or capabilities. He calls us, he challenges us to identify, embrace, and share our gifts with the church and with the world. He tells the early Christians,

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:4-7)

Paul then enumerates some of the gifts of the Spirit: wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, the discernment of spirits, various kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues.

As we heard in our scripture lesson, following the death of Jesus the disciples gather together to celebrate Pentecost. They are undoubtedly celebrating it as a Jewish holiday, for as yet there is no institutional church and even the disciples' identity as Christians has not yet fully formed. Suddenly a sound like the rush of a mighty wind fills the house. Tongues of flame descend from heaven to rest upon their heads. Just as both John and Jesus predicted, they receive a baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire.

The disciples experience the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth that Jesus promised would come to them following his death and resurrection. They

experience what it is like to be filled with this Spirit, the Spirit of the risen Christ. The first manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit in them as individuals and as a small Christian community is a variation of the gift of tongues. Scripture says, they “began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

The disciples then move outside the house. Sensing that something strange is happening, a crowd gathers. When the disciples speak in the various languages of all those gathered in Jerusalem for the festival, the crowd is amazed. Some, however, are skeptical. They suspect that the apostles may be drunk, “filled with new wine.”

Peter, speaking in their defense, says, “Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning.” Peter doesn’t say this, but he might have added that, as we know, people do not generally communicate well when they are drunk, and the disciples were communicating very well.

It seems to me that the crowd was essentially correct. The apostles *were* drunk. They were filled with new wine, the new wine of the Holy Spirit. This was the new wine that Jesus promised when he told his disciples,

No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins. (Mark 2:22)

If the apostles are to receive the Holy Spirit, the new wine, they will need new wineskins. New wine cannot fit into old wineskins, old structures or containers. New wine needs a structure or container that can grow and expand.

We need to not only build a new wineskin; we need to become a new wineskin, a wineskin that can serve as a container for the Holy Spirit. We need to do this as individuals in our spiritual journey. We need to read, pray, and share with each other. We need to grow in the faith. The nice neat package, the system of beliefs we learned in Sunday school many years ago may not prove sufficient to see us through the dark and difficult moments of our lives.

We also need to build a new wineskin; we need to become a new wineskin in our church. We do this as we grow in the faith. We do this as we confront the peace and justice issues of our time. We do this as we evolve in our understanding of the will of God, an understanding that is guided by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus warns us that if we try to put new wine into old wineskins, the old wineskin will burst. If we, either as individuals or as a church, cling to the old wineskin, the old ways, the old structures, and resist the winds of change that blow both across us and through us, we probably won't burst. We will just gradually atrophy because there will be no room for the healing, strengthening, challenging, reconciling presence of the Holy Spirit within us. We will not be able to receive the new wine that Jesus promised.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the power to break down barriers. The Holy Spirit gives us the power to overcome our propensity to dichotomize, to divide the world into two subsets. When we do this, we invariably place a value judgment on each of the two groups. We hold one to be superior and the other inferior, one to be good and the other bad, one to be holy and the other to be evil.

When we split the world into two groups: the Christian and the non-Christian, the Catholic and the non-Catholic, the Jew and the Gentile, the Muslim and the infidel, the heterosexual and the homosexual, the white and the black, the saved and the damned, we build a barrier that separates us from the group that we judge as inferior, wrong, or even evil. The Holy Spirit gives us the will and the ability to break down these barriers.

We need this experience, this gift of the Holy Spirit. We need this in our lives as individuals. We need this gift to overcome, break down, or dissolve the barriers that separate us from our brothers and sisters. We also need to overcome, break down, or dissolve these barriers as a church. Just as the apostle Paul helped the early church to break down the barrier between Jew and Gentile, we need to be an inclusive church. If we can do this as a church, we may be able to help strengthen this deep sense of connectedness with all God's children throughout the world.

The third gift of the Holy Spirit is a new source of authority for our beliefs. It calls us to move the grounding of our faith from the Bible or the institutional church to the Holy Spirit who dwells both within and among us. It calls us to undergo the same kind of change that occurred at the first Christian Pentecost. There the celebration of the giving of Torah, the Law, was replaced by the presence of the Holy Spirit, the new law, the new covenant in Jesus which carries the authority of his presence.

Jesus' teachings and actions were not defined or bounded by scripture. When he had the opportunity to cure a man with a withered hand, he showed that he was not bound by the laws of the Sabbath, laws that were grounded in both scripture and in the traditions of his people. Jesus lived by the spirit, not the letter of the law.

This is the challenge that is placed before us when, in our complex twenty-first century life, we encounter situations that were not fully understood in biblical times. In these situations, our response should be guided not by the letter of the law, by a literal reading of scripture, or by the ancient teachings of the church, but by the Holy Spirit.

The fourth gift of the Holy Spirit is the gift of deep and meaningful prayer. As recorded in fifth chapter of Matthew, Jesus says,

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your father knows what you need before you ask him.

Jesus leads us away from the old style of prayer, the style we may have been taught as children, to a new kind of prayer. He tells us to eschew meaningless repetitions with the belief that by multiplying words we increase the odds of being heard. He tells us to pray in secret. He also tells us to be honest and searching in our prayer.

In Romans 8:26-27, the apostle Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit will help us to pray. He says,

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We need to remember that when Paul uses the term “saints” he is referring to all of us.

Haven't we all had that experience? We are confronted by a situation that we experience as overwhelming. Perhaps it is something that is happening to us. Perhaps it is something that is happening to someone we know and love. Perhaps it is the cumulative weight of the names on our prayer chain or the tragedies that confront us daily in the news. We want to articulate our thoughts, our feelings, but we can't find the words that fit. I think we have all also had the experience of wanting to say something comforting or consoling to someone who has just lost a loved one or who has just been diagnosed with cancer. Words fail us. Perhaps we can do no more than sigh.

The apostle Paul tells us that in these situations the Spirit intercedes for us. The Spirit not only strengthens our prayers for others, it helps us communicate our care and concern to the person who is suffering. The Spirit helps us articulate our deepest needs, our deepest feelings. It also tells us what we need to bring before God in prayer.

Prayer is at the heart of our spirituality, the heart of our faith. We need to move past the egocentric prayer that so often finds inward or outward expression. We need to move past the desire to bend God's will to ours. We need to pray as Jesus prayed: “Not my will, but Thine be done.” In our prayer life, we can seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to discern God's will and ask for the courage to live in accordance with it.

Finally, as Paul emphasized in his first letter to the church at Corinth, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are not about us, or they are not just about us. Paul says, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

The gifts of the Spirit are meant to build up the body of Christ. Each of us as individuals is a part of the body of Christ, a part of God's temple, the dwelling place of

God's spirit. These gifts can help us grow into fullness of life as individuals. The body of Christ is also the church, also our church. The same gifts of the Spirit that build us up as individuals are intended to be used to build up our church. The body of Christ is also the world. As Peter reminded his listeners in the words of the prophet Joel, God pours out his Spirit upon all flesh. We need to do our part to build up or heal our world

All creation is the self-expression of God. If we are truly guided by the Holy Spirit, if we are the recipients of the gifts of the Spirit, we will embrace our brothers and sisters no matter what their race, religion, or sexual orientation as incarnations of God. If we do this, we will be doing our little part to bring about the kingdom of God on earth.

In our worship and in our daily lives, let us open ourselves to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Let us open ourselves to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Then let us use them, as the apostle Paul indicated, for the common good, for the building up of the mystical body of Christ within us, within our church, and within our world. If we can do this, we will usher in a brand new birthday of the church.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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PRAYER FOLLOWING THE SERMON

Almighty God, be with us in our celebration this morning. Help us to not only celebrate the birthday of the church that occurred at the time of the first apostles, but help us to midwife the birth of the church today. Be present to us as individuals and as a church. Help us to be open to receive the many gifts you bestow upon us as individuals and as a church. Then guide us in our expression of these gifts that we might bring your light and healing to a darkened and broken world.