

Acts 2: 1-8
Genesis 11: 1-9
John 7: 37-39

Sermon for May 31, 2020

THE SPIRIT OF PENTECOST

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: We are harvesting the fruits of the Kingdom

Well, here we are again at Pentecost, in which we commemorate the day the Christian Church was established, we may even say, the day the church was born.

Like some other Christian holy days, Pentecost has its root in a Jewish religious counterpart. The word Pentecost means The Fiftieth, and it was the Greek name of a Jewish festival that was also referred to in Hebrew as The Feast of Weeks. There were three great Jewish festivals to which every male Jew who lived within twenty miles of Jerusalem was legally required to come, and Jews from everywhere else were strongly encouraged to come. They were the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles.

All three had historical symbolism, but they were more fundamentally agricultural festivals. Passover, falling in what we would call mid-April, celebrated the beginning of the first harvest of the year, the barley harvest. Pentecost, in early June, celebrated the beginning of the wheat harvest. And Tabernacles in mid-October, celebrated the in-gathering of all the year's harvests, the barley and the wheat and the vine. It was the greatest and most joyous of all the Jewish festivals.

Pentecost, the Fiftieth, had that name because it was held fifty days – that is, 7 weeks, a “week” of weeks – after the Passover. And since the resurrection of Jesus – our Easter – took place during Passover, so our Pentecost takes place seven Sundays after Easter Sunday. And that's exactly where we are today, the seventh Sunday after Easter.

The passage from Acts that Jim/Sheryl read for us this morning, and which we read every year at this time, describes the first Christian Pentecost. The followers of Jesus are gathered together, quite possibly in the same upper room where they'd celebrated Passover at the Last Supper with Jesus.

Something very extraordinary happened during that gathering, although what exactly it was we'll never know for sure this side of heaven. Luke, the author of Acts, wasn't there, so the account he gives was based on what someone or some others told him. But whatever the exact physical details, we can say with certainty that the disciples had an experience of the power of the Spirit of God flooding their beings as they never had before, a power that thereafter completely guided and strengthened them in such a way that they literally went forth from that room and, over the course of a few decades, changed the entire world they knew. And what we can also say for sure is that what happened to them involved their voices, involved speech, and their ability to offer a message that all and everyone could understand.

On the internet a while back, I saw a clip that I'm sure many of you have seen, or at least have seen something like it. It was of a young woman who'd been deaf since she was a little girl, and who had just had a cochlear implant and was now about to hear something for the first time since then. You see her and her folks and a medical practitioner. The medical practitioner fusses around with the equipment that will switch the implant on, and when she does so, there's a moment of silence, and then the mother says something to the girl like I love you. And the girl looks at her, and just looks at her, and then breaks down in great sobs of joy. And of course if you're watching, you break down too; there's pretty much no way you can't.

I can just imagine something like that being the sense of wonder and joy that somehow energized the spirits of those in that room that day, and of those who first heard them.

Way back in the eleventh chapter of Genesis from which Jim/Sheryl read to us this morning, we find the terrible story of the Tower of Babel.

It's the story of how God, for His own reasons, scattered people over all the earth and gave them different languages. Whether you take the story literally or not, it clearly reflects the deep spiritual insight that the inability to communicate with each other through a shared language is an insurmountable obstacle to bringing people together as a shared body with a shared purpose.

Those of you who were with us in Bible Study last year as we worked our way at our usual breakneck speed through the book of Genesis will remember that chapter eleven brings to a close the first part of the book, in which the Bible traces human history from its very beginnings in the garden of Eden through the terrible fall and banishment from paradise, the beginning of human conflict in the murder of Abel by

his brother Cain, the growth of that disharmony up to the point where God sent a great flood to destroy all but a small remnant of humanity in Noah and his family, and then the same problems coming back and mixing with pride to begin to build the mighty tower of Babel, the tower that would reach to heaven itself and thus symbolically replace God. And then we read of God's response.

In the book of Genesis, immediately following the story of the tower of Babel, the author moves on to the story of Abraham and Abraham's descendants, the collection of which comprises the rest of the entire book. So what the book of Genesis essentially shows us is God making several futile attempts to deal with the pride and contrariety and inherent violence of human nature, and then, so to say, starting over with an entirely new plan, a plan involving the creation of a new and peculiar people, a people who stand in a special relationship with God, and whom God will then use to spread the message of that special relationship to the whole world as an invitation for everyone to join. And to so-to-say *buy time* for the creation of that people, God scatters the nations and confuses their languages.

And now we come full circle back to our upper room, and that extraordinary day when the Spirit of God and Christ is given to the disciples in the great miracle of Pentecost. And surely the sign and symbol and meaning of that miracle is to show that God's plan has now come to fruition. We may say that Christ came to teach the world a new language, a universal language, one that everyone can learn and everyone can understand. We can call it the language of love, if we're careful to say that *love* doesn't mean what you find in romance novels. What does it mean? We discover its meaning in one and only one way, and that is by studying and meditating of the life, labor and words of Christ himself.

Love means self-sacrifice. Love means courage. Love means a hunger and a thirst for righteousness. Love means the power that light has over darkness. Love means a hatred of sin but not the sinner. Love means mercy and meekness and peace and purity and above all forgiveness.

Our gospel reading for today is from the seventh chapter of the Gospel of John. Let's read it together.

On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (37-39)

The feast mentioned here is the feast of Tabernacles, the last and greatest of the three feasts, the feast of the final in-harvesting, when all the crops have been gathered and stored and the time has come for thanksgiving and peace and satisfaction.

And it is on the final and greatest day of that feast that Jesus stands up before the crowd and tells them: I am the source of your inspiration and health and life. I am the well-spring. If you have faith in me, then you also will become such a source.

When the Jews were wandering in the desert, God told Moses to strike a rock with his rod, and out of that rock water flowed to replenish and nourish and sustain his people. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul takes that image and applies it to Jesus:

...and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. (10:4)

And surely this is the message and the promise of Pentecost. The Spirit of God and Christ has been given to the whole world, to each and every one of us. When we open ourselves to that spirit and accept its guidance, we become part of a community of perfect understanding and mutual Christian love.

Does that mean our problems all disappear? Certainly not. Does it mean never showing spiritual flaws? Heaven's to Betsy, no! I myself typically show several before getting out of bed! Does it mean blissful relationship with everyone? Would that it were so!

The disciples were not transported to heaven on the first Christian Pentecost. On the contrary, they were sent back into the world, to begin teaching the language of Christ to the rest of the world. And that process continues today.

The promise of Pentecost is not one of ease and comfort and material reward. The promise of Pentecost is the promise that history has a goal established by Almighty God, that there is direction from God for reaching that goal, and that who we are and what we do matters in God's unfathomable yet glorious calculation.

And so we pray in the spirit of water, the spirit of light, the spirit of truth, the spirit of life. These and others are images Christ uses in many ways to point to the same message: God's purposes, fashioned so long ago, have now, in Christ himself, been

accomplished. The kingdom of God is at hand. Rejoice, give thanks, be at peace. The hard work is done, the grain is safe in the storage barns, the whole human family is gathered together at one great festival, with one language of love, one fountain of water springing up into everlasting light, one Way, one faith, one Savior, who is Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.