

Pentecost All Over Again
Acts 2:1-11
Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Pentecost is the third major feast day on the Christian calendar, along with Christmas and Easter. Unlike Christmas and Easter, Pentecost doesn't seem to grab the same attention as the other two, probably because, there aren't any secular traditions competing with the biblical message. That's why, unlike Christmas and Easter, Pentecost is only celebrated by the faithful, in church, during worship, on Pentecost Sunday mornings.

At the same time, the meaning of Pentecost, even for many practicing Christians, is probably the most confusing of the three major holy days. Even people who aren't practicing Christians know Christmas celebrates the birth of Christ and Easter is all about his resurrection, but ask many Christians, "Why do you celebrate Pentecost?" and you may get the answer, "Isn't Pentecost the Church's birthday?" or, "It has something to do with the Holy Spirit empowering the disciples, but I'm not clear on the concept of the Holy Spirit. God the Father and Jesus the Son, I get, but the Holy Spirit? Not so sure."

So, since even believers get confused about what or who is the Holy Spirit, maybe we should start with this: the Holy Spirit isn't a what, but a who. The Holy Spirit isn't just a divine energy or impersonal force meandering through the universe, instead the Holy Spirit, like the Father and the Son, is a warm and loving distinct personality.

Next Sunday, according to the Church calendar, is Trinity Sunday, when we emphasize the Christian doctrine of three distinct persons in one God. For now, let me reaffirm the Church's core conviction that the Holy Spirit, the Father and the Son are distinct personalities, equal and in unity with one another. That's why as Christians, we should give the same attention to the Holy Spirit as we give to the Father and the Son, but usually don't because the Holy Spirit is harder to grasp.

We first hear about the Holy Spirit in the very first verse of the Bible. "In the beginning the spirit of God moved (or brooded) across the face of the deep." (Genesis 1:1) The Hebrew word for spirit translates into our English word wind. In other words, the Spirit is like the wind. You can't see it, but you can see the power of the wind, causing trees to sway and occasionally turn umbrellas inside out.

In his conversation with Nicodemus the Pharisee in the third chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, unless one is born of water (baptism)

and the Spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of God... The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going, so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:5, 8)

In these two verses Jesus introduces the essential role the Holy Spirit plays in the process of salvation. Simply put, the Holy Spirit brings us life.

Later in the Upper Room, Jesus promised the disciples after he was gone, the Holy Spirit would come to remind them about everything Jesus taught them (John 14:26) and as we saw last Sunday, just before his ascension into heaven, Jesus also promised the Holy Spirit would empower them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Ten days after the ascension these promises were kept. The disciples were still gathered together in the Upper Room, no longer afraid and in hiding but now obediently waiting and praying.

I think it's essential we focus on what the disciples were doing just before the Holy Spirit's arrival. They were making themselves available, opening their hearts and minds to God's enveloping presence, inviting God to empower them to be Christ's witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth.

Have you ever wondered why the disciples experienced all those miraculous signs and wonders that seem forbidden to us today, why the Holy Spirit was so blatantly active in their time and now seems more low key in our time? Could it be the disciples had a greater sense of urgency than we do?

It certainly wasn't because they were more "holy" and pleasing to God than us. Think of all their missteps recorded in the gospels. They let Jesus down as much as we do. Then why did they experience what we don't, the amazing and awesome power of the Holy Spirit rushing over them in a way seemingly implausible to the modern mind?

Maybe because they were almost begging for it. Luke reports after the ascension the disciples returned to the Upper Room where they were "...constantly devoting themselves to prayer." (Acts 1:14) That phrase, "constantly devoting themselves to prayer" says it all. A quick read of the Book of Acts reveals most of their free time was spent in intense conversations with God, not just asking but especially listening. Could it be they experienced the power of the Holy Spirit because they craved it more than we do?

Question: Do you pray the Holy Spirit will descend on you, your family and church, so you and those around you can be ardent witnesses to Christ's gospel? Maybe that's not on your top ten list of things to pray for, but maybe

that's why we're not experiencing those signs and wonders permeating the Book of Acts. Maybe God's waiting for us to be so bold to ask for these things so the Pentecost experience can become our experience and not just something we commemorate once a year.

Obviously the disciples had strong motivation to pray for the power of the Holy Spirit after all they spent three years with Jesus 24/7. Equally obvious, we never had the opportunity of spending quality time with Jesus like Peter, James and John, watching him heal and teach, seeing Jesus with our own two eyes forgive and welcome tax collectors and sinners. We also didn't endure his crucifixion and experience his resurrection. We didn't watch him ascend into heaven.

Is that why we don't devote ourselves to prayer, begging for the Holy Spirit to empower us to be Christ to our neighbors, spreading his gospel with equal fervor and commitment?

I've had more than one conversation with Christians who are convinced if they were with Jesus they'd be more motivated to spread the gospel because they knew him personally. Maybe so. But let's face facts, it ain't gonna ever happen. We live two thousand years later; and yet we have equal access to the same power that motivated the disciples. Pentecost wasn't a one time event, frozen in history. Pentecost, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer, is a continuous phenomenon. The Holy Spirit especially wants to envelope, transform, and empower our generation and then send us out to change the world.

That, in a nutshell, is what Pentecost is about. The Holy Spirit visiting and inviting you and me so we can be bold and focused in our calling to be latter day disciples of Christ begging God to use us to expand the borders of his Kingdom.

For the past two years I've closed each service with a benediction quoting Jesus' instructions to his disciples before sending them out in twos into their neighborhoods looking for people who were just as lost and confused as they were without Jesus. Today we are also instructed to spread the same news: the Kingdom is coming yet already here. Some of Jesus' commands seem strange and outdated, like "...kick out demons and raise the dead..." And yet through the Holy Spirit we too are empowered to tell the Good News, bring new life to a dying world and, the ability to confront and stop evil in its tracks, all in Jesus' name. That's the message of Pentecost.

If you want your Pentecost to happen, devote yourselves constantly to prayer, preparing yourselves for the Holy Spirit to rush over you like a mighty wind empowering you in your own neighborhood to be a faithful witness of Christ and his gospel.