

Something Wonderful Going On  
Rev Tom Robinson

Of the three great Christian holidays, Pentecost is the one that makes a crowd. Christmas has trees and poinsettias, Easter has lilies and tulips, but poor old Pentecost has no plant to call its own. It doesn't have a fictional character that we can put up at the shopping mall and have kids sit in their laps and have their pictures taken. It is not a day given to buying and selling anything, except maybe for sun tan lotion for those tongues of fire dancing on your heads.

It's a troubling day for our culture because it is not a day that can be easily manipulated. You can't shove Pentecost into a box of consumerism. That may be the number one reason why Pentecost has never quite caught on like the others – it's not commercial enough. We live in a consumeristic culture: We want what everyone else has, we want what we can purchase and own and possess.

But Pentecost won't be possessed; you can't buy it, you can't sell it, you can't manipulate it. That's because Pentecost has a very special meaning for our Hebrew friends, and a very special meaning for us Christians.

For the Hebrews, this is one of the three great holy days. Pentecost literally means "50 days," and it occurs 50 days after Passover, the great holiday marking the deliverance from their slavery in Egypt. This is a day in which the first fruits of the harvest were given, the very best that the people had. Thus, it was a kind of stewardship holiday, a reminder of the gifts God had given to us, gifts given to share with others. It was a day to mark, as we sung a little while ago, "Your Spirit goes forth to create and renew..." On this day our Hebrew friends sing praises to God for the ways God re-creates and renews.

For us Christians, it is a day to mark as the birthday of the church. Why do we call it that? Did the church just rise up on its own and give birth to itself? No, of course not. The church came out of the tradition that gave us the Pentecost, and the law, and the expectation of a Messiah. What was different was that the gifts that God gave to the church empowered more than just the priests; it empowered everyone. Men, women, young, old, every single one of them who was filled with the love of God would be given a special gift so that the church could be a special witness in the world: A witness of the wonderful things that God has done, is doing, and will do, through Jesus Christ.

It is for this reason that Pentecost has a special connection with us that the other two Christian holy days struggle with. We talk about how Jesus is born within us, but we cannot see that without the work of God's Spirit to illuminate the way. We can talk about how we experience resurrection every day, but again it takes the movement of the Spirit of God to show us what that looks like. By all means, let us celebrate with great joy Christmas and Easter; but let's also remember that - without the gifts of God's Spirit that we celebrate this day, this Pentecost - the festivities of those other two days are just so much window shopping.

That's a big part, I think, why the Stewardship Committee wanted to distribute twenty dollar bills today and challenge all of us to let God's Spirit work mightily and creatively. This is more than just bringing some more money into the church coffers, although given our collective financial situation at the present time that's not necessarily a bad idea. But this was a challenge to all of us to let God's spirit, God's wind, God's breath blow into this body of Christ and give us all new life, filled with excitement, joy

and wonder. It's a sign that wonderful things are going on around here, and we all want to be aware of that, touch that, and be joined with that.

One way of tapping into this Spirit that runs wild and wonderfully in the world is to participate in our Amazing Talent Adventure; either by investing the money and returning it to God's glory or by praying that what we are doing will benefit our ministries here.

But I think there is something else about this day which affects all of us. It is how God's Spirit still moves among us, tapping us on the shoulder, getting us to notice, bringing us into conversation with God and with each other. In about three weeks I will be heading down to Atlanta for my last Doctor of Ministry course, and it will be led by one of my favorite teachers, Catherine Gonzales, who is a retired church history professor at Columbia Seminary near Atlanta. The class is on Devotional Literature, and we will examine some of the classics which have deepened the lives of the faithful over the years. I have a lot of reading to do, and two of those books sounded a familiar theme to me. One is *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis, a 15<sup>th</sup> century priest from Germany who wrote about living the faithful life. Someone who studied a Kempis a century later was Ignatius of Loyola, a priest who lived in Spain in the turbulent years of the Protestant Reformation and who, like Martin Luther, saw that the church needed to change. Ignatius took his studies of a Kempis and wrote *The Spiritual Exercises*, a kind of Middle-Aged how-to book about living the devotional life. It was fascinating to me to read in these old books a theme suggested by a postmodern writer, Brian McLaren. McLaren said that in our day we need to tap back into the ways of the ancient church in order to reconnect with the Spirit of God who gives us – and the whole church - life. In doing this we are living as Pentecostal people, people who recognize that God's Spirit doesn't automatically show up just because we are nice people. We, like the Christian community of long ago, have to be together, we have to be in prayer, we have to be expecting that God will show up.

In doing that, we recognize that living the Christian faith is not something we take for granted; it is something we have to work at, something we have to practice. And one way we practice that is by taking three journeys. The first journey is called the way of purgation; that is, the way of letting go of all the stuff that we don't need in our walk with Jesus. When we are moving to a new house, one of the benefits is that we get to check and recheck the stuff we have, and to let go the things that are not needed anymore.

So it is with the spiritual life. There are some things we can take with us; some things we would do just as well leaving behind. We let go of those things that keep us from God; our lust, our greed, our self-absorption, our sense of entitlement, addictions to anything that keep us from being the people we were created to be. We also let go of those self-defeating and self-negating things, like beating ourselves up for every little thing we do wrong. We let go of the thoughts, the habits, the lifestyles which are not bringing us closer to God, or to others. We let go of them because we are going somewhere, and they will just get in the way.

Where are we going? We can see that through the second journey, the journey of illumination. This is the way of letting Christ be the light on our journey. When we were kids in Sunday School we used to sing "This little light of mine..." We still sing that when the Elders of Jazz come here on the Sunday after Easter. But the light is not just the light of being a good boy or a good girl. It is the light of Christ's teachings, Christ's love, Christ's compassion that lead us to live differently. We need that light, and we don't always recognize how much we need it.

McLaren writes about how when plants come inside for a long period of time they start to look wilted and weak. They need the sun; they will grow toward the sunlight, because they need the sun for their growth. In just the same way, we need the light of God's love in Jesus Christ for our growth. When it is withdrawn because things have gotten in the way, when we haven't taken that first step of letting go of things we don't need, we start to get limp and weak. We need to grow into the light. God's love in Jesus Christ is our light; the Spirit of God shines on us as we live in the light, as we extend ourselves out to others, as we read the Bible, as we give of our gifts so that the poor are lifted up. We need to walk in the light of God's love in Jesus Christ to sustain ourselves.

The third part is called union with God, and it is the most mystical one of all. It is walking in such a way with God that we become one with the Spirit of God. There are some folks who think they live this way, but the amount of energy they spend in trying to show off to others how holy they are tell who their god really is – it is themselves. To be united with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit means that we walk in a way which gives glory to God, and when that union comes it might just catch us by surprise.

The noted mathematician Blaise Pascal kept a piece of paper in his pocket near his heart which he showed to no one. At his death his friend were interested in what that piece of paper said, what great mathematical equation had he cooked up that he kept to himself. They unfolded the piece of paper and read:

“The year of grace 1654, Monday, 23 November ...

From about half past ten in the evening until about half past midnight. FIRE.

Certitude. Certitude. Feeling, Joy. Peace ... Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except GOD ... Greatness of the human soul ... Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy ... Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ ... Let me never be separated from him ... Renunciation, total and sweet. Complete submission to Jesus Christ.”

This great mathematical genius was so caught up in his relationship with God that it became a part of his being. He didn't parade it, he didn't show it off. But he felt it, he experienced it; but what is more important, he became one with it.

I can't tell you anymore than anyone else can what this being united with God looks like, as if it were one more goal to be accomplished. I just have a feeling that you will know. You will know because the sense of peace and joy and wonder will be so overwhelming that you couldn't possibly describe it. Except maybe by tongues of fire and a wind in the room.

In the journey we will take in this Amazing Talent Adventure, I hope that we will also take the journeys of purgation, illumination and union with God. For in taking that journey, we will be celebrating Pentecost, in all of its wonder, not just one day a year. But every day of our lives.

Amen.

Bible text: Acts 2:1-21

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