

Church of the Pilgrimage  
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### **Needing a Pentecost?**

I had to chuckle a bit about this Sunday. Pentecost, the birthday of the church. And Seniors recognition. And a moment of gratitude. And Chicken Sunday, part of our Heifer month celebrations. For part of this week I had this odd image of chickens running around with flames on their heads...Chicken Pentecost.

It's a lot to tie together. Good thing the Holy Spirit is good at that sort of thing.

I spent a large part of this week trying to devise a schedule for confirmation class moving forward. Busy kids, busy lives, busy parents...it's hard to make it all work. Can a church our size have a confirmation class with two meetings a month and expect those same kids to attend youth group meetings? As I talked with various people about this -- some staff, some parents, some church leaders -- as I listened hard and tried to make the necessary accommodations, working as I was *four months ahead of time* on this schedule, I thought "I need a Pentecost."

You see the first Pentecost, while predicted by Jesus, was not a highly scheduled event. It was fifty days after Easter to be exact, but you get the sense that when the mighty wind blew through the place, people were amazed and surprised. No one whipped out their planning calendar, their smart phone or their day timers to make Pentecost happen. No one followed along in a well-designed order of worship or distributed a carefully planned agenda. No, it was a fully-present-to-the-moment kind of thing. There were people, people gathered, and there was a palpable undeniable sense of God's Spirit moving in their midst, and there was along with the surprise, great joy. Oh, there was some confusion (Were these people drunk?) but in the end, after Peter spoke, it was all pretty clear and simple: God was equipping God's people to be God's people.

Pentecost is many things. It is, for one, a day when the Spirit put things that had seemed apart, disparate, together – you know, like chickens and Pentecost. All those people from all those places, with different languages and culture, hearing each other speak, each in their own language. When I think of the way people communicate today, often not reading whole e-mails or Facebook posts before having a reaction, often not taking the time to speak something important to someone face to face...when I think of all the misunderstanding and the not giving people the benefit of the doubt, when I think of all the people, myself included, who often assume that someone else's reality (take, for instance, the many men of the "me too" accusations) is so different from mine that it is scarcely on the same planet, when I think of social media being used to mock and bully people and the number of black people who have been harassed lately just for being somewhere, a Starbucks or a college campus or even their own neighborhood

I think of the unifying force of the Holy Spirit, that great knitting together of people from far and wide and I think “We—we all of us -- need a Pentecost”.

How about you? Does Pentecost sound frightening to you, or does it sound like a good thing, because it was, unlike much of our daily lives, such a powerful experience and undeniably God at work? And no one fell asleep, or was too busy, or felt distracted or bored or would rather stay home in their pajamas and do the crossword puzzle or head out to “have brunch’. Do you not long sometimes to be seized like that, to be swept up like that, to be transformed like that? Do you not long for our church to be caught up in a power like that? I would think maybe then we could do nearly anything for God.

And this week, with the terrible news from Santa Fe, Texas -- another school shooting, more deaths, a teenager from that community actually quoted as saying *they expected it to happen here, because it has happened so many other places....* O God, how long? How long is this going to continue? Don’t we *need* something powerful, something out of this world amazing, to knock us off our feet and change all this?

But there is another powerful scripture about the Holy Spirit; and it is part of today’s lessons too. These words of Paul to the Galatians, the second lesson we heard today, were spoken to a church that was fighting about many things: high on the list being how to include non-Jews in the fellowship, when they weren’t circumcised, and hadn’t been spending years following the dietary and hygienic laws. Paul found it ironic that though Jesus came for freedom, his followers were now placing burdens, or making barriers for other people. Freedom is for love, Paul wanted to say. Freedom isn’t for infighting, or for competitiveness, or for filling the God sized hole in our lives with the wrong things.

In this passage, Paul first spoke of what comes about when we focus on “the desires of the flesh.” There is, he said, a root of sinful self-interest in us all that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. We can choose to be led by the Spirit though, and in this escape “the erratic compulsions of our more selfish or ego-driven selves.” (Peterson) See, the problem with the flesh, or ego, is not that it desires but that its desires are disordered; it wants the wrong things or wants good things in the wrong way –usually too much or too little. For instance, “Wanting sexual intimacy, it pursues cheap sex; wanting contact with the Divine, it pursues idols; wanting joy, it carouses.” (Mark Douglas, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol 3, p. 188) Again, Paul lifts up a God size, or Spirit size hole, and warns us about how we might try to fill it up with the wrong thing.

But then there is the contrast, what happens when the Spirit lives in us. Hear the passage as it is translated by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*:

*But what happens when we live in God’s way? God brings gifts into our lives,*

*much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard – things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.” (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Galatians 5:22-23)*

What our second lesson suggests then is that the Holy Spirit brings more than a rush of wind, excitement and feeling. It brings gifts, gifts leading to the ultimate transformation of our inner selves. It brings a more harmonious way of living with ourselves and others. And I think in this way, maybe as much as anything, we all need a Pentecost. Which is to say, we all need to choose the way of the Spirit over the way of the ego, which in self promotion or self protectiveness seems to sow so much discord in the world.

When things seem crazy in our world, when life seems chaotic, when people around us seem harsh or unfeeling we often want God to come in and do something mighty and turn things around. But when we pair these two scriptures together, as we are today, it's possible the mighty thing resides right in here, in us. We can pray for a Spirit, a presence that will enter into us, transform us and make us able to be more balanced, more joyful and ultimately more effective at serving God.

So, one of the ego things the Galatians were getting into was comparison. Who was more spiritual, more gifted, who wielded more power. This way of comparing made those who had always been Jews want to assign a lesser status to the non-Jews, sad as that is. Though Jesus came for freedom, the early church got into holding onto legalism as a way to protect what had always been. You have to first be circumcised if you are going to follow Jesus. You have to learn and follow all our rules if you are going to follow Jesus. Paul saw this as an unnecessary game of control. Paul's encouragement was to see Jesus life and death as being part of a pattern, a pattern we in the church of Jesus Christ are meant to follow: to live a full life, a godly life, we have to put to death in ourselves that part of ourselves that wants to control others as a way to put ourselves ahead.

This week my college age daughter called for some advice. One of her roommates was getting mean. She was knocking Amy down, and competing with her in front of other friends. Oh, I sighed. Meanness is hard. But try to remember you've been friends for a while now. Give her some space and some time. Maybe she is getting used to living with you (they are brand new roommates for the coming year) and is herself feeling off center. Whatever you do, I said, don't play that meanness game. Don't compete with her. If you won't play, I think she will tire of it. Later this week, Amy texted me and told me her roommate is now picking on someone else. That's an improvement for Amy, but let's hope for more than that.

I'll tell you what made me feel good about this: Amy actually turned to me for help... she was actually open to sorting things out.

It hasn't always been like this. Another good thing: I was able to affirm Amy, telling her I admire the way she doesn't get sucked up into drama, the way she really tries in her life to avoid that. My daughter (just two years ago she was a high school senior, contemplating this move into adulthood), my daughter is growing up. And of course, these kinds of situations – they don't stop just because we are done with high school or college.

And self-awareness about what is going on with us when things go south interpersonally...this is something that takes a lifetime to learn. Something great someone said in bible study this week: "When someone is mean to me, and I start thinking about how to get back at them, quickly I say no, no, that is just your ego talking."

So back to our scripture. Paul is saying we have better things to do with our time than compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. As Eugene Peterson puts it, "we have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original." Matt, Jack, Michael, Michaela, Justin, Monty and Carter, as you venture forth, as you begin a new chapter of your lives, I hope you will remember this – you are an original, and therefore precious...and this goes for everyone else as well. So, go ahead and do what you do the very best you can – just don't get fooled into thinking this makes you better than someone else.

The part I love the most about Eugene Peterson's translation of this scripture is this line about the Spirit gifting us with "a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people." This is a way to think about Pentecost that I find refreshing. Pentecost shows us that it is all God's world, and we are all God's children. The church is no more holy than the lunch line or the bus stop, any place where we also encounter other children of God. So everywhere we go we can express a God nature, a nature that welcomes and includes. A nature that does not need to play games with other people. A nature that is deeply curious about what makes the other person "an original" too.

This is the fruit of the Spirit, the work of the Spirit in us. So once more, with feeling: The fruit of the Spirit is Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Come, Holy Spirit, with all your Pentecostal power. Come, enter our hearts and live in us today.

Amen.