

Pentecost – A Celebration of the Spirit
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Today is Pentecost Sunday – a day in which we celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit among us. It is not only a day to celebrate, but also a day to recommit ourselves to hear what the Spirit might be saying to the church in 2005 and then respond appropriately.

It seems to me that in the evangelical church tradition, Pentecost has not always received the prominence on the church calendar that it deserves. I have noticed through the years that sometimes it barely gets mentioned – sometimes it is even forgotten entirely.

Historically some churches have placed Pentecost on par with Christmas and Easter, even assigning two or three days to the celebration of this event like they do for Christmas and Easter. I know that designating such “holy” days does not guarantee that the Spirit actually gets heard. Or that those who celebrate these holidays are in fact more in touch with the Spirit than those who don’t celebrate them. But most of us would ask a lot of questions, and likely be quite upset, if this year the church decided not to celebrate Christmas – or just give it passing mention on the Sunday closest to December 25th.

But that leads me to wonder why we find it convenient to be so casual and cavalier about the celebration of Pentecost. If it had not been for Pentecost, it is unlikely that we would even know about the birth, death and resurrection of Christ today. In the biblical narrative, Pentecost is the hinge that swings us forward from the gospel stories into the dynamic birth and subsequent growth of the Christian church.

How do you suppose the biblical story would have gone had the Spirit not come to the 120 persons gathered in anticipation of his coming? It seems to me that without this hinge the story of Jesus birth, life, death and resurrection would have died. The hopeful group that had gathered to await the Spirit would eventually have scattered as their food supply and patience began to run out. And that would have been the end of it – the fast three-year roller-coaster ride would have been over and life would have settled back to normal – whatever that meant back then. And we might still be in the dark about the nature of God’s love and redemptive agenda in the world, let alone in our lives.

So I invite you this morning to reflect together with me for a few moments on the significance of Pentecost, not only for the world, but more specifically for the Gospel Fellowship Church, and indeed for each one of us individually.

When we look back to the Old Testament record, we find frequent references to the Spirit of God at work. The Spirit was involved at creation – moving over the face of the waters. And subsequently we find reference to the Spirit of God filling and empowering certain individuals for special tasks – usually the judges and prophets and occasionally kings. The closer we get to the end of the Old Testament the more we find emerging in the oracles of the prophets, in particular, a vision that one day God would pour out his Spirit in a much more generous fashion – upon all flesh!

Perhaps this vision is best expressed by the Prophet Joel in the passage that Peter would quote in an attempt to explain to the crowds what happened when the Spirit was in fact poured out at Pentecost.

*And it shall come to pass afterward,
That I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and daughters shall prophesy,
Your old men shall dream dreams,
And your young men shall see visions.
Even upon the menservants and maidservants
In those days, I will pour out my spirit
(Joel 2:28).*

Of course Jesus picked up this theme toward the end of his life as well. This is especially evident in his final address of comfort, counsel and instruction given to his disciples as recorded in John chapters 14 to 16.

Notice how naturally the promise of the Spirit slips into Jesus vision of how things will be once he is gone.

*Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father.
Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it.
If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you
(John 14:12-17).*

I want to stop here for a few minutes to take note of some significant things in this passage. **The first** has to do with the name given to this Spirit of Truth who was to come after Christ would depart. The original word in the Greek is “Paraclete.” If you check in various translations it is translated in a variety of ways. That is the case because the word “paraclete” is one of those words that can not be translated to render its full meaning with just one word in another language.

Those of you who know more than one language will understand what I mean. How, for example, do you translate the Low German word, “Schladonz”? It would take many English words to describe what a “Schladonz” is. It might be easier to point to an example and say, so and so is “Schladonz.” One English word would hardly do the job.

The King James version translates the term “Paraclete” as “Comforter”. That is how I first learned it. And it surely can mean that. And it might even be an appropriate translation given the anguish the disciples were experiencing at the prospect of losing Jesus. And heaven knows that we all need the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. (It should be noted that at the time when Wycliffe first used the word “Comforter” in his

translation of the Bible it had a much broader meaning than it does in our English world today.)

But there is a danger in limiting our understanding of the work of the Spirit to that of being a comforter as we understand that word today. In our culture a “comforter” can also refer to a woolen blanket that keeps you warm and comfortable on cold winter nights. Snug, safe and asleep! I have a sneaking suspicion that we have a tendency to think of the presence of the Spirit in this manner. His presence keeps us comfortable, safe and asleep. After all, we know what is true and right and it is good that the Spirit agrees with us. We prefer to be left undisturbed and so we wrap our comforter around us like a cocoon and quietly wait for the day when the “worm that we are” will be translated into a butterfly and we can wing our way to glory.

But the term “Paraclete” means much more than “Comforter”. That is why it has been translated in a variety of ways, all of them being just as right as “Comforter”. The term “Paraclete” can mean “Counselor” like the RSV and NIV have it. It can also mean, among other things, “Helper, Advocate, Friend, Consoler, Encourager, Instructor, Assistant and Provider.” And the word is used in these various senses in other passages of the New Testament.

So be forewarned. If you invite the “Paraclete” into your life you are in for much more than being comforted. Once released fully in your life, the Spirit will stir things up and take you in directions you never dreamed possible. It will even “kick butt”, as we see in the biblical record of what happened in the wake of Pentecost to Ananias and Sapphira.

The second thing I want you to notice about this passage is that the promise of the “Paraclete” is given in the context of a number of assumptions. One is that we love Jesus. The Spirit seldom manifests himself in the absence of love. Love is the trigger that releases Pentecost. Don’t expect pentecostal power when you don’t love Jesus. Another assumption is that we are attempting to keep his commandments. We are serious about our walk with God. A third assumption, according to this text, is that we will be doing the works that Jesus did and even greater. We will be preoccupied in carrying on the work Jesus began. So Pentecost is a response to our response to Jesus.

William Barclay says the following as to the meaning of Jesus declaration in this passage:

What Jesus is saying, says Barclay, is: “I am setting you a hard task, and I am sending you out on an engagement very difficult. But I am going to send you someone, the ‘Paraclete’, who will guide you what to do and who will make you able to do it. The Holy Spirit will bring you truth and will make you able to cope with the battle for the truth.

So the Spirit is given in the context of a love for Jesus, a challenge to take discipleship seriously, and a call to mission. Ultimately to be successful in this way of life we will need the “Paraclete.” This is a far cry from simply sliding under a comforter and going to sleep.

A third thing I want you to notice in this passage is the latter part of verse 17, where Jesus says *you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.* I had never noticed before that Jesus tells his disciples that they already know the “Paraclete” and that he already dwells with them.- and this is before the Day of Pentecost. Now it could be that Jesus is simply referring to the fact that he is still with them. But the context makes it clear, it seems to me, that he is speaking about the “Paraclete” who is to come and who *will be in you.*

If I take this passage at face value, I am forced to believe that in one sense, at least, the Spirit was already at work among the disciples before the dramatic events that happened on Pentecost. This is comforting in one sense. That means that in some primary way the Holy Spirit already was with the group of 120 who gathered together in prayer to wait for the Holy Spirit to come upon them. In theological terms we sometimes speak of such a dynamic using the terms “already, but not yet.” (For example, Jesus says at one point that the Kingdom of God is already here, and then on another occasion he says it is still to come.) So even in their waiting for the Spirit to come these early followers of Jesus were not left entirely alone. He already was with them but there was yet more to come.

This truth can be a great comfort to us. As we wait in expectant prayer at the Gospel Fellowship Church for new and powerful manifestations of the Spirit, we can be assured that he already is with us, even though more dramatic manifestations are yet to come. This may all seem like a mystery – this “already but not yet” dynamic - but we should not be surprised because the Spirit and his work will always be a mystery to us. Who can explain the unexplainable? It must simply be experienced in order to know it to be true.

Let’s stay in the Gospel of John for a few more minutes and take note of the other references Jesus makes to what the role of the Spirit will be. This will affirm the notion that he is more than a “Comforter” in the contemporary sense of the word.

John 14:26 *But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*

Now this is a scandalous statement for many Christians today. There are some who think that all that ever needs to be said about faith and life is already contained in the Bible. But note that Jesus doesn’t just say that he will help them remember all that he taught – of which the New Testament is record. That he will do. But in a separate category he says that the Spirit will *teach you all things*. This lines up well with the earlier statement of Jesus where he says that we will do even greater works than Jesus did while on earth – not simply copying Jesus in order to remain biblical.

In other words, Jesus followers would encounter many situations in which they would have to depend on the Spirit to help them find the right way and the power to walk in that way because Jesus would no longer be there to give hands-on direction. So in a sense Jesus is encouraging his disciples to set their sights beyond the immediate dynamics and move beyond their comfort zones where all questions seem to be answered from the start. And I believe that call comes to us today as well.

John 15:26-27 *He (The Holy Spirit) will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses.* Notice again how the Spirit's work is related to our work. He will bear witness to Jesus and that is a work we are called to do as well. So the assumption is that the Spirit will help us in our task of bearing witness to Jesus.

John 16:8 *And when he comes, he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement.* Again this is a startling revelation, because in many circles Christians have assumed it is their task to convince the world of sin, righteousness and judgement. And it seems we like the last the best. We like to sit in judgement and proclaim with the certainty of an all-wise judge how God will deal with so and so. To let go of that self-proclaimed privilege will take more power than we can muster ourselves.

John 16:13 *When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.* There is a very real sense in this text that Jesus has more to say but that his time is up. So he will entrust the Spirit with the task of guiding us in those areas of faith and life Jesus hasn't had a chance to speak to. And when he does, he will declare to us what is Jesus' will, which is that which he has received from the Father. This he will do in an on-going way. Again this is scandalous to many Christians who believe there is a chapter and verse in the Bible for every and any situation that might arise. But these texts seem to imply that there will be situations in the future in which the Spirit will have to help us find our way. The question for us remains whether we are willing to trust the Spirit to do that.

I am aware that most sermons related to Pentecost focus on Acts chapter two. As you will have noticed, my time is nearly gone and I have not even arrived there yet. Since we have heard many sermons of what actually happened on the day of Pentecost, I have chosen rather to back up and reflect on Jesus' words about what was to happen. I have done this partly because when we only focus on what happened in Acts, we are tempted to lock up Pentecost within that narrow time frame and forget about the on-going ramifications that Pentecost would have throughout the ages, as Jesus seems to imply. It is easy to say, "Wow! Interesting story. Wish I could have been there. Now what's for lunch."

I will, however, summarize what happened in Acts to provide illustrations for us as to what can happen when we allow the "Paraclete" to penetrate our world in 2005.

First I note that the unexpected happened. In that case a sound like that of a mighty rushing wind, tongues of fire on their heads, and people speaking in other languages. Some have suggested that unless we see these particular signs the Spirit has not come upon us. I suggest to you that these specific signs are beside the point. The point is that the unexpected and the unexplainable happened. So the question that comes to us is whether we are open to the unexpected and the unexplainable. It seems to me that in our modern world we want to have everything under our control. In that context it is hard for the Spirit

to do the unexpected and the unexplainable among us. If we have it all figured out ahead of time, how can the Spirit get in – even edgewise.

As I have watched and listened over the last few years I have noticed time and again the unexpected and unexplainable happening among us. One example has to do with a young man in our midst who has committed himself to mission. While serving at Union Gospel Mission, a total stranger walked up to him and told him, “I don’t know you, but I feel I must tell you what God has told me. He has called you to mission, and it’s close to home.” Talk about having your socks blown off! Today he is plunging head first into the vision of relating to kids and their parents in the trailer court.

But there are many other surprising and unexpected developments in the lives of many in our congregation. There is a new openness on the part of many to become vulnerable and honest. For example, it would have been hard even a few years ago to imagine us talking to each other the way we do in our men’s Sunday School class. Are you open to the unexpected? Have you noticed it? If you have, rejoice, because the Paraclete has come to us in new ways.

Secondly, I notice that all who believed were together and had all things in common, and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all as any had need. Again some, like the Hutterites and The Twelve Tribes group in Winnipeg, whom I encountered recently, have taken this to be a formula for living in community with a common purse, and I do not judge them for it. But again, I suggest that precisely what happened back then is beside the point. The point is that those on whom the Spirit had touched down changed their view with respect to their money and possessions. Whatever they had was at the disposal of those who did not have.

This is a hard point for many of us to swallow, living as we do in one of the wealthiest nations in the world. Our natural inclination is to hoard money and goods just in case we won’t have enough to live high on the hog to our dying day. In Jerusalem it was the local widows and the poor who benefited from this new generosity that came with the wind of the Spirit. In light of the situation in our present world where thousands die every day for lack of basic food, shelter and potable water – let alone a chance at education or hope for their children’s future – what is the Spirit calling us to do - today? Is he not calling us most surely to take a long hard look at our life-styles? To make some adjustments as to what we think we have to have? To free up some of our resources for sharing with the millions who simply die for lack of basic necessities?

I feel the wind of the Spirit on this one? Do you? I am encouraged by many of our young people for whom making a comfortable living is not their highest priority. There is a whole new generation emerging that will teach some of us older folk what it means to be touched by the Spirit with respect to our money and goods. God bless you! We will take note and at least some of us will pledge ourselves to learn from you as you have learned from the Spirit.

Thirdly, I notice that those touched by the Spirit lived their transformed and empowered lives out in the public square. They didn't cloister themselves in private buildings but were found on the streets, in the temple, in the community around them - rubbing shoulders with the world, like Jesus had done. They didn't build fences around themselves, and there in their safe cloistered communities speak words of judgement about those on the outside. They connected with their culture. They were on display in public and people found their changed lives appealing. Many came to faith. The text says, *the Lord added to their number*, but it is clear from as well from the text that this was possible because of the open witness of the many who had changed their priorities.

How far this is removed from so much of our church life in the past. We have been tempted to practice our faith within the walls of our churches – in our safe and shuttered communities of faith. But again, I sense the wind of the Spirit stirring us up – drawing us out into the public square. (Not to gossip in our coffee shops about our brothers and sisters we don't agree with or how poorly our leaders lead.) Instead there is a growing commitment among us to engage the world in which we live. To immerse ourselves in the struggles of our time. To offer alternative solutions to the problems facing our society. An example of this is our growing commitment to immerse ourselves in the trailer park. It is a work of the Spirit.

Personally, I have found an avenue of being out in the public square through my web site. Every sermon I preach here is posted on my site for the world to scrutinize – and they do. And every article and book review I write is out there for the public to evaluate. And it is of interest to me to note that my sharpest criticisms come from those in church communities who apparently have had everything sewed up for the past half century or so. Yet, I feel enlivened by the Spirit as my dialogue about faith and life begins to unfold in the public square.

There is so much to be said about the effects of Pentecost as it reverberates right into our world in 2005. I have only begun, but I must bring this address to a close. There are many examples beyond the day of Pentecost of how the Spirit has moved in ways not even anticipated by the first disciples of Christ..

When John Newton abandoned his job as a slave trader upon meeting Christ in 1750, it was a work of the Paraclete – the Spirit. Even while the best theologians of his day assured him that the Bible was quite okay with slavery as an institution, Newton said “Bologna” – one of those “B” words we need to learn how to use more frequently. Instead of trading in slaves he sat down to write the hymn “Amazing Grace.”

And when, half a century later, William Wilberforce finally persuaded the British Parliament to make slave trading illegal in 1807, it was a work of the Spirit. And when, in 1833, three days before his death, his friend came to inform him that because of his untiring witness the parliament had outlawed slavery in the whole British Empire, it was a work of the Spirit. Even though for another half century Bible-thumping conservative Christians in the American South would continue to insist that slavery was God's plan for the ages.

And even though racial prejudice is still rampant in former slave states to this day. The Spirit promised at Pentecost is usually out ahead of the pack, inviting us into a future where he can *teach us all things*.

Are we willing to allow the dynamic of Pentecost to continue to touch our life at the Gospel Fellowship Church? What about you personally? Are you willing to be touched in unexpected ways and to align your life with what the Spirit is trying to teach you?

If we are willing, we can declare that Pentecost is alive and well in 2005. If we are not, I suggest that next year we forget about celebrating Pentecost, because it will all be smoke and mirrors anyway.

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