

"What Pentecost Points To"
Sermon for Pentecost Sunday
Lectionary Year A
May 11, 2008
Text: Acts 2:1-21
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Today is Pentecost Sunday. As you know, Pentecost is sometimes called the birthday of the Church. Why is that? What happened at Pentecost anyway? Did they go to McDonald's or Chucky Cheese's or Dave and Buster's? Did anyone sing "Happy Birthday"? Were there balloons? Did someone blow out the candles on the cake? Did they play games? Well, the record of what happened at Pentecost is found in the second chapter of the book of Acts, so I ask you to focus your attention on that passage of scripture.

While it is true that at Pentecost there was not a birthday party thrown for the Church, it *is* fair to say that the event of Pentecost marks the beginning of the Church. Out of that event local, individual churches began to be formed. After Pentecost the small group of disciples that we find huddled together in one place at the beginning of the narrative go out as apostles to establish churches throughout the region which in turn sent missionaries to other regions until Christianity spread throughout the known world.

Obviously Pentecost was an exciting experience for those who were there to be a part of it. What happened at Pentecost was unique. As far as we know, nothing like what is described here has ever occurred since then. It was a one-time deal.

However the event itself points to some lessons for us and our time, and I would like to focus on three of those this morning. We may see as we look at the meaning of Pentecost that although it was a unique event, the work of God through the Holy Spirit that the event points to is a work that was going on before Pentecost and that has continued ever since.

The first thing I believe we can say is that **Pentecost points to God's desire to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ to all persons.** The word Pentecost is the Greek term for the Jewish festival of Weeks, so named because it fell on the fiftieth day after the ceremony of the barley sheaf during the Passover observances. The festival of Weeks or Pentecost marked the beginning of the offering of the first fruits of the harvest, so it was an agricultural celebration honoring God for the gift of the crops of the harvest and a celebration dedicating a portion of those crops to God.

It was a requirement for the Jews of that time to attend as many of the religious festivals of the year as possible. The most well-known Jewish celebration besides Pentecost was Passover, which was held earlier in the spring. Since travel in those days was more difficult at that time of year, due to the weather conditions in early spring, considerably more Jews could make the trip to Jerusalem for Pentecost in late spring than for Passover. We have an indication in the passage from Acts of the distances people traveled to come to Jerusalem. They came from all over that part of the world. Apparently thousands of Jews were in the city at that time to celebrate Pentecost.

And so in the midst of this great gathering of Jews from all over

the world, God gives the apostles the gift of tongues so as to enable them to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ in the languages of all those who were there. What a miracle of communication that was! Even Cingular, Sprint, Verizon, and T-Mobile put together can't beat that. All who were there had the opportunity to hear the gospel proclaimed in their native tongues.

Pentecost, then, points to God's desire that all persons all over the world be given the opportunity to hear the gospel addressed to them in their own situation, in the way they can hear it best, understand it best, and best put it into practice. Pentecost points to the fact that God comes to us in our circumstances—no matter who we are or where we are—and presents himself to us in ways we can comprehend. God communicates who he is and how we should live in relation to him. Pentecost symbolizes through an event that *it is God's nature to communicate openly, clearly, honestly, and completely with us, meeting us where we are in language we can hear.*

Pentecost definitely points to God's desire to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ to all persons, but that is not all that Pentecost points to. **Pentecost also points to the acts of translation and interpretation (the gift of tongues) as God's means of communication.** In this story from Acts we are introduced for the first time to God's marvelous gift of tongues. What is the gift of tongues? How does it work? The text seems to make it clear that the gift of tongues was given in order to communicate the gospel, and the process of communication appears to have had two aspects to it. The first is *translation*. As you know, translation is the putting into one language the

words of another. All of you who are in middle school or high school are learning to do that in your language classes. You are learning to translate Spanish or French or German into English and vice versa.

It appears that the ability to translate instantaneously was at the heart of what the apostles received in the coming of the Holy Spirit and the gift of tongues. This gift allowed the apostles to be able to speak in the languages of all those who were present, and this gift was not given to show off the intelligence or the spirituality of the apostles; it was given to communicate the gospel.

There seems to have been more going on than just translation, however. *Interpretation* appears to have been a part of the gift of tongues as well. Notice the reaction of the crowd to what was happening. They were amazed and perplexed and asked the question, "What does this mean?" Some of the people who experienced that first Pentecost even came up with an interpretation of their own, namely, that the followers of Jesus were drunk, even though it was still early in the day. The confusion of the crowd points to the need for the gospel to be explained to its hearers. Even though the crowd heard the words being spoken in their own languages, they still needed to have those words interpreted, as well as to have given to them an interpretation of the event itself.

Peter, in his sermon, provided that interpretation. In the reading from Acts 2 that we have for this morning, Peter explains that what is happening at Pentecost is a fulfillment of what the prophet Joel spoke of. It is the outpouring of God's Spirit to which the prophet had made reference many years before. Peter attempts to explain what is

happening at Pentecost within the broader context of God's progressive revelation through the life of the nation of Israel and continuing down to this event of Pentecost. Those who were gathered in Jerusalem, Jews from throughout the world who were thoroughly familiar with this passage of scripture from Joel, would have understood easily what Peter was talking about. Peter was simply putting the experience of Pentecost into a familiar frame of reference for them.

The gift of tongues, it seems, involves both translation and interpretation. At Pentecost, the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ was communicated in each person's own language through the act of translation and communicated with familiar concepts through the act of interpretation. In my view, whenever translation and interpretation of the gospel are effectively occurring today, there you will find the gift of tongues being appropriated. So for me, it is in *preaching*, which requires both translation and interpretation, that we see the gift of tongues employed in the Church today. *When the gift of tongues has been given and utilized in preaching, the result will always be a clear hearing and a meaningful understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

There is one more thing we can say about this experience. Not only does Pentecost point to God's desire to communicate the gospel to all persons and points to the acts of translation and interpretation as God's means of communicating the gospel to all persons, **Pentecost points to the inclusive nature of the gospel and God's desire to unite all persons in the community of faith.** The gift and demand of God's love always have been presented in ways and means that were meant to show the inclusive nature of God's love. That is to say, God's love is meant for

all persons, and that love always has been presented by God in a way that is supposed to communicate its inclusive nature.

God created all things and gives life to all things. Creation is an inclusive act. Israel, as a community of faith in covenant with God, was supposed to model God's character and reveal to the world—through its internal life and external witness—the inclusive nature of God's love. The covenant is an inclusive act. The nation of Israel failed in that calling, however, by becoming exclusive and attempting to keep God's love to itself. At Pentecost, as we have mentioned already, we see the beginning of the Church, yet another inclusive act. It is the Church's responsibility to demonstrate how deep and wide, how far-reaching, how boundless, how limitless is God's love for all, not just some, but all people.

What happened at Pentecost points to the revelation of God's love breaking out of the confines of Palestine and moving into the larger world around it through the Church. With the gift of tongues, the ability to translate and interpret the gospel, this small group of apostles and followers of Jesus, all of whom were Jews, reached out to proclaim a message to the world, as represented by the diversity of people gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate this annual festival.

Peter ends this portion of his sermon with these words from Joel: "Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Everyone. Everyone. Everyone shall have the opportunity to call on the name of the Lord so as to be saved. That is what Pentecost points to. It points to God's desire for all to be saved. It points to God's will for everyone to have the opportunity to experience God in their lives through a community of faith. *Pentecost is about God's inclusive love, a*

love that reaches out to everyone and seeks to embrace all persons as children of God.

Pentecost, then, points to certain things that are true about God. In my view, Pentecost is about God's unrelenting desire to reveal himself to everyone. Pentecost is about God's unceasing efforts to create a community of faith that includes everyone. Pentecost points to the resources God provides for the Church that allows it to translate and interpret the gospel of Christ so as to be understood by everyone. So what are we when we proclaim the gospel for all to hear? What are we when we are an inclusive community of faith, welcoming all into our congregation? What are we when we use the resources God gives us to translate and interpret the gospel clearly and meaningfully to all? What are we when we do these things? *We are a Pentecostal Church*, that's right, a Pentecostal Church. And we are a Pentecostal Church because we worship a Pentecostal God, the God Pentecost points all people to.