

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 23, 2010
Pentecost Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 2:1-11
Psalm 33:12-22
I Corinthians 12:4-13
John 20:19-23

We come together once again at a very significant point in the Church year and in the life of the church. Today is Pentecost, the day we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost marks the conclusion of the “Great 50 Days” of Easter, and it marks the beginning of the Church as it carries forward the ministry it has received from the Holy Spirit.

Many Christian forms of worship had their beginning in ancient Jewish practices, and Pentecost is a classic example. Pentecost was an ancient Jewish feast and a major festival for the children of Israel in the Old Testament. In the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, God instructed the people to bring him special offerings from the harvest. At the beginning of the harvest, they were to bring him some of the “first fruits,” which were often the first figs or dates that ripened. This usually happened near Passover.

But then seven weeks after the first fruits of the harvest appeared, the people were to bring God special offerings from the completed harvest. Thus, Pentecost was also known as the “Feast of Weeks,” because it occurred seven weeks after

Passover. For the Jews, there were three feasts that were so important that adult males were required to attend them each year. Pentecost was one of those feasts.

This explains Luke's comment from Acts 2:5: "Godly Jews from many nations were living in Jerusalem at that time." From the time of the Babylonian captivity, Jews had been dispersed throughout the world. In the first century, these persons were dispersed throughout the Roman empire. But because Pentecost was an important feast, thousands of pilgrims were in Jerusalem to observe it, to celebrate and give thanks for the harvest.

This occasion is ripe, then, for the fulfillment of prophecy that one day God would send the Messiah who would gather Jews dispersed throughout and bring them back to Jerusalem to participate in God's reign. Listen, for example, to the prophet Micah's words:

In the last days, the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem will become the most important place on earth. People from all over the world will go there to worship. There he will teach us his ways, so that we may obey him. For in those days the Lord's teaching and his word will go out from Jerusalem. (Micah 4:1ff.)

So here, in a nutshell, is what is happening on the day of Pentecost. Jewish persons from all over the Roman empire are gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the first fruits of the harvest as well as the completion of the harvest. They are gathered to celebrate God's giving of the Law and making them his covenant people on Sinai.

And with signs and wonders very reminiscent of Sinai, the Spirit of God descends on the people in Jerusalem, and the people begin to realize that the harvesting of God's family is underway and that it includes people from all walks of life, not just a select few.

Red, yellow, black and white; rich and poor; educated and uneducated; professionals and blue collar workers; young and old; male and female; Jew and gentile -- the promise is for *all* and the Spirit is poured out upon *all*.

Of all the things that amaze me most about the powerful display of the Spirit on Pentecost, I think what amazes me most is God's power to transcend and overcome differences among people.

Think about it for a moment. There are 120 people who have gathered in an upper room. They have made a decision to reorder and rearrange their lives, their schedules, their priorities, in order to *wait* for something that Jesus promised.

Now in a group of 120 folks, you're going to have vast differences, both great and small. Put a group that size together in the same small space for several days, and it could get interesting.

Think about our small group here at Epworth, and all of the things that make us unique and different. Imagine all of us in in the parish hall for several days, with our little quirks and quibbles, and different ways of seeing and doing. We could very well get on each other's nerves!

This group of 120 persons were all together, waiting in anticipation for a promise.

And after the Spirit descends, a crowd of thousands begins to gather outside to see what all the commotion is about. That crowd includes people who've been dispersed throughout the world: Greeks, Arabs, Romans, Africans, Asians, to name just a few. And each person in that crowd is able to understand the conversation and witness what is happening in his/her own language! The Spirit is able to transcend great differences in people without erasing their diversity!

On this one day, the Spirit of God transcends multiple distinctions and differences among people in bringing about God's purpose. This day is the beginning of the biblical promise that from many parts would come *one* body. This day is a reminder forever that God's Spirit has the power to overcome every division and disconnect among people, and to transcend every hostility that separates people from one another.

I wonder: what might happen in 2010 if people would be open and receptive to allowing the Holy Spirit permission to go to work on the divisive things in our lives, our homes, our churches, and our world?

The answer to that question, ultimately, is up to each of us.

And so on this day which recalls the thunder and lightning and earthquake and smoke on Mt. Sinai, this day where the children of Israel were made the people

of God and received God's law on tablets of stone; this day which celebrates the writing of God's law on the hearts of people by the gift of the Holy Spirit; let us open our hearts afresh and anew to the movement of the Spirit in our own lives and in this place.

And let us give thanks that the gift of God's Spirit is not just for a select few, but for ALL of us who with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto him.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.