

The Problem With Pentecost  
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Acts 2:1-15, 22-24,36

Read from the book, "The Dust Off Their Feet",

There they were on Pentecost; it was a little over a month after Jesus' death and resurrection, and the disciples were back together again. They had to choose who would replace Judas (who had taken his own life after being guilt-ridden over having turned Jesus in). So they met and chose Matthias, and here they were gathered together. It was then that the spirit of God, like a wind storm, rushed through their group. There was such a commotion that people from town started to gather around them, and the Holy Spirit - not as wind but now as fire - came and touched each person and gave them the gift of language and the gift of understanding and the gift of hearing and the gift of communication. And in that moment, the church was born. And then, what happened? Does anybody know what happened next?

The problem with the day of Pentecost is that we think it is all about this day. We think it's about that moment. We think it is all about the fire and the Holy Spirit and the church is born. We light some candles and then we move on. That is the problem with Pentecost. There is a lot more to Pentecost than that story and that is what we are going to be focusing on today.

*O God,*

*You must be so accustomed by now to our timid and cowardly ways of waiting behind closed doors, just as your disciples did, settling for the easy, safe certitudes of life instead of seeking the exhilaration of gospel freedom. Sometimes we prefer to take the easy way, the way of habit and comfort and proven success, instead of trying something new and facing the chance of failure.*

*But the lesson of Pentecost is that simple people like ourselves opened themselves to receive the gift of Your Holy Spirit and were empowered beyond their imaginations. In the strength of Your Spirit, they faced down their fears and were strengthened for Your service.*

*Forgive us, Lord, and help us this day to open the doors that hold us back so that Your Holy Spirit can come into our lives and fill us with freedom from fear, courage to move forward, and power to see and to understand and to do what is Your will for our lives.* **AMEN**

As a pastor, I do a lot of weddings. It is really interesting, these days, helping young couples prepare for their wedding. They come in, usually nervous because they have to meet with the pastor; especially for people who are not part of our faith community and don't quite know what this female pastor is going to

be all about. They don't know if they are going to have to have a quiz or a test – are we going to be compatible – will she actually marry us – what are we going to do. They are very nervous. These days, brides tend to come in lugging a huge three-ring binder with lists, and details, and a calendar, and deadlines, and information about a cake, and reception hall, and pictures of flowers. Some have poems that they have put together, and song choices. Everything that you can possibly think of is crammed into this binder. Young couples these days spend so much time and energy planning for their wedding.

What I usually find is they spend a very large amount of time and energy and money planning their wedding, and a very small portion of time planning to be married. The wedding is only the party, right? Once you are married, you have lashed your life to this other person forever. There is a lot to adapt to and a lot to get ready for. I find that most days they are much more concerned about the celebration than they are about daily living as a married couple.

That analogy is sort of how we are, as the church, in relationship to Pentecost. We spend all of this time and energy and excitement on this day. We put up our beautiful fire banners, we have banners out in the courtyard and we sing special songs; the kids do special things – it is a big deal; sometimes we even have a birthday cake for the church. And then we tend to skip to something new or we skip to something else. We don't spend any more time focusing on what happens to the church once it is born.

What happens to the church after it is born? If you read the rest of the book of Acts, you will find a lot of big, harrowing adventures between Paul and Peter. People are thrown into jail, people are beaten, people are flogged, people are stoned, people run for their lives. Paul and Peter get up and make speeches and sermons. They face judges and leaders. It is really a blockbuster kind of tale. And the church grows; it goes from the fledgling group of a few hundred people to thousands and thousands of people. It mushrooms overnight.

It is not the harrowing adventures and it is not the amazing speeches that make the church grow. What happens next, literally in Acts - in the same book that I read from this morning - is that this fledgling group of people decide to become a community with one another. They decide that instead of being these separate people from different areas, with different backgrounds, they decide to join together and be a community.

*Acts 2:42 says, "The community continually committed themselves to learning what the apostles taught them – gathering for fellowship, breaking bread and praying.*

*Everyone felt a sense of awe because the apostles were doing many wonders among them. There was an intense sense of togetherness among all who believed. They shared all of their material possessions in*

*trust; they sold any possessions and goods that did not benefit the community and used the money to help everyone in need. They were unified as they worshipped at the Temple day after day. In homes, they broke bread and they shared meals with glad and generous hearts and the new disciples praised God and they enjoyed the goodwill of all the people in the city.*

***Every day, the Lord added to their number people who were experiencing liberation.***

Every day their church grew - not because they had an amazing preacher, not because they had a pretty building (they didn't have a building). Everyday the Lord added to their number because they figured out how to be a community with one and another, and because they experienced liberation in that moment. Liberation from what? We have to remember the context of the early church, and then we may need to remind ourselves that it is possible that our 21<sup>st</sup> Century experience of Christianity has a lot in common with first century Christianity.

People in the first century Christianity were people who were not in the majority; they were definitely a minority within the religious tradition of Judaism. The establishment tradition of their day was very threatened by what Jesus taught - by The Way that Jesus had laid out for them. The old way had to do with a long list of laws. There were a lot of people who stayed in business because of those laws. There were a lot of people who remained in power because of those laws. But when Jesus came he said, "Look, I am not coming to take away those laws, I am coming to fulfill them. It is not about the letter of the law; it is not about legalism; God is much more concerned with you and me." God is much more concerned with how we treat one another than whether or not we have done "number 52" on the list of laws. God is much more concerned about you and about me and about how we treat each other.

When these communities started to form, they based the core of their community around six things that they did: they prayed together; they ate together; they worshiped together; they learned together; they took care of each other when they were in crisis; and lastly, they reoriented their own personal finances around the work of this community - to support the work of this community. That made the first century church boom. It made them absolutely boom.

You may be wondering what it is that we, in 21<sup>st</sup> century America have in common with this first century church? There are a lot of similarities. I know that there are many people who think that we are a Christian nation. Every once in awhile there is a Letter to the Editor that says we are a Christian nation. But, we are not - we are not, and have never been. I don't necessarily think that that is a bad thing - it gives us a lot in common with the early church. We are not a majority voice; we are a minority voice. That may not be true in terms of other

religions, but it is true in terms of the prevailing tradition of today – because the prevailing traditions of our day are consumerism, and militarism, and bias.

There is a long list of rules that have to do with those three things that Jesus' way goes against. If we continue to live in the way of Jesus, those things will become threatened and there will be people who will try to work against that. Church is not the center of community anymore – we are definitely on the outskirts of community. We have a lot in common with the early church, so in order for us to continue - in order for us to grow - we are going to have to pay attention to the early church.

Often times when we talk about growing the church, people wonder why we have to worry about growing the church. Why aren't we concerned about the people who are here. Let's pay attention again to Acts and the lessons that we learned from the early church. They worship together, they pray together, they eat with each other, they learn from each other, they take care of each other when they are in crisis and they reorient their financial lives to support the community. To me that sounds like we are taking care of one another, but we are also opening up our way of life to other people and inviting more people in to experience the amazing thing that we experience here.

It was interesting when I figured out what those six things were; they sounded a lot like the six things mentioned in the book, "Real Faith – The Six Marks of Discipleship". That was the first resource book that we used when Tom first arrived. In fact, they are exactly the same. The Six Marks of Discipleship are (1) daily prayer, (2) weekly worship, (3) daily Bible reading/learning, (4) serving in and beyond the congregation, (5) nurturing relationships, taking care of each other, and (6) reorienting our financial lives to support the faith community. It is so important that over the summer we pay attention to the lessons of Acts, and that we not just read this book together then show up at worship, but that we actually start to live in that way.

Over these past few weeks, I have experienced the church in a way that I have never experienced it before. Being the pastor, you are sort of used to showing up and taking care of others. But over the past two weeks, I have had people show up and take care of **me**. This is a profound experience for me. It reminded me of conversations that I have had with many of you before, when you were going for surgery or when you have had something bad happen in your life and one of us comes to you and asks, "Can we help you? Do you need anything?" And what do you usually say, "Oh no. No, no, we are fine; we don't need any help, we'll be okay." We tend to have this "pull yourself up by your bootstraps", Lone Ranger, brave-little-soldier kind of mentality. Now that I have been in your shoes, I know better.

We need each other and we need one another's help. We have to allow each other to help each other. We have to allow each other to be the church for each other because that is when the Holy Spirit becomes real in our lives.

When Ron Wehling came over and mowed my lawn this week, it wasn't just that he came over and mowed my lawn; that was the Holy Spirit at work. When Lindsay Swisher came over and sat with me for three days when I wasn't suppose to pick up anything over 20 pounds (which meant I couldn't physically pick up Chloe), that wasn't Lindsay; that was the Holy Spirit. When Sue Case did my grocery shopping for me (because I wasn't allowed out where there were germs), that wasn't Sue Case; that was the Holy Spirit. When Marty Schimmelpfenneg came over day, after day, after day and packed and unpacked my wound and listened to me cry, that wasn't Marty; that was the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is alive and it works in our lives through our gifts.

Let's not just get caught up in the Pentecost day. Let's be the church; let's be the community with one another. Amen.