

A Sermon for the  
Feast of Pentecost  
May 11, 2008  
Texts: Acts 2:1-21  
1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

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“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ...All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean? But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’” But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams....Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’” Acts 2:1-8, 12-17, 21

“No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ...For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews and Greeks, slaves or free--and we were made to drink of one Spirit.” 1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13

This is always one of the most special days every year. Special for the young people who come to the altar and make their profession of faith and who are recognized for taking a new, more responsible step in their life of faith. Special for me because it marks the culmination of a period of closer relationship with these young people, teaching them, talking with them, encouraging and guiding them. Preaching on Pentecost has always held a special importance for me because I take it as a time to speak particularly to them. This is their day, so I want to speak

to them, but on the other hand, just about everyone here participated in such a day. About forty-five years ago I was sitting in a very similar position to theirs.

I was being told that this was not the conclusion of something, but rather the beginning. That confirmation class was the preparation, the beginning, of a life-long learning process, a life of exploration, of questioning, of doubting, of experiencing God in new and different ways. From what you all wrote it is clear that you are already in the midst of this process. I'm not sure whether it will be encouraging to you, or perplexing to you, when I say I am still in the midst of this process. We all are, and will be, until the last day when we finally stand face to face with our Lord Jesus Christ and we see and understand everything with perfect clarity.

This week I have been thinking and praying about how you are starting a new phase of your faith journey today. And, in one of those coincidences that I think was Spirit inspired, I was drawn to a book on my shelf that I had purchased recently but not read yet. Something told me to pick it up and look at it. The book is by Dr. Walter Brueggemann who is one of our country's most prominent Old Testament scholars, a book of his sermons and prayers. I turned to the very beginning of the book and the first item was a prayer he wrote that he shares at the beginning of the school year with the Old Testament class he teaches at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. When I read it I thought it captures so well the prayer we should have for you, here at the beginning of this new phase of your faith journey. I'm going to read it a stanza at a time and then comment on it.

It is entitled, "On Reading the Old Testament":

"We begin as eager beavers,  
partly in gladness for new tasks,  
partly in anxiety for much work to do,  
partly in fear at all the unlearning we must now face."

As you move on in your life, you will be faced with new tasks, anxiety over what seems to be so much work to do, and your journey will involve encountering new ideas and new knowledge that will cause "unlearning" and "re-learning" to take place. Your understanding of faith, yourself, the world, will change and transform. The Holy Spirit that is in you, will encourage you, calm you, and guide you in this process.

Brueggemann continues:

"We begin yet again another new beginning  
as our learning always does--  
only to discover yet again  
that our beginnings are in the midst of your continuing,  
your continuing sovereign demand,  
your continuing gracious mercy,  
your continuing dread-filled presence."

You are at a new beginning point in your journey, but your new beginning is the continuation of God's journey with you. We celebrate the Holy Spirit today. The Holy Spirit is God's unstoppable, never ending, beckoning to you, inviting you, to follow, to seek him, to know him. God's continuing grace and mercy welcome you back when you stray away. The Holy Spirit helps you experience God's presence. Brueggemann calls it a dread-filled presence, which I

understand as an awe-filled, wonder-filled, mysterious, presence; as well as a loving, comforting, embracing presence.

“So we put our beginning down in your continuing,  
confident of the edges of our faith,  
and so free for the big things now to be  
learned and received and enacted.”

Stepping out into new beginnings can be stressful. Be confident. Surrender your anxiety to the certainty of God’s continuing faithfulness to you. The Holy Spirit strengthens the edges of your faith so that it can hold together yet have enough flexibility to grow and encompass the big things you are going to learn, and receive, and enact in your life.

The prayer concludes:

“We pray this day that we have received from you,  
that we may live it back to you,  
in wonder, love, and praise. Amen.”

On Pentecost we celebrate the receiving of the Holy Spirit. We celebrate that you have received. In the gift of the Holy Spirit you have received from God, love, faith, hope, courage, goodness, generosity and more. We pray that you may live it back to God, by living it to others, by living life with wonder, with love, with praise to God.

Today, as we are celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit, we read Paul’s description of the gifts the Spirit gives to the people of God. All of you, all of us here, are “gifted and talented” you might say, through the power of the Spirit. Some of your gifts you already have discovered and are evident to us all. But there are spiritual gifts in you that you are not even aware of yet. You embark today on a journey of discovery. To discover more of the gifts that the Holy Spirit has and will equip you to use and share. Paul says one thing about these gifts of the Spirit that I think is of most importance. The spiritual gifts are given for the common good.

The gifts of the Spirit to teach, to heal, to comfort, to serve, and so on, are for the benefit of the community, of people beyond ourselves, not for us alone. The concept of concern for the common good has not been strong in our world lately. It needs to be given a lot more attention. Being attentive to the common good requires a proper sense of humility, of valuing the needs of others as much as, or more, than your own. All of the gifts we have we utilize for the common good, because in the Holy Spirit we are all one. The Holy Spirit is the unifying force of God, binding everyone together. God’s Spirit of life is in everyone. So, as you discover your gifts, be aware of the common good and how you can use your gifts for the good of all. Live back to God what you have received, by living it to others, with the same love and mercy God has given you. Be yourself, be who you are, God’s beloved children, temples of the Holy Spirit, lights that shine in the darkness of the world, for the benefit of all. Amen