

Some Notes on Pentecost for Preaching and Teaching

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In the Church calendar, Pentecost is often called the “birthday of the Church.” It is often celebrated as a bright spot—almost a fun time—in the liturgical year. The overall story of Pentecost is well known, and I do not intend to go into detail about it here. In what follows I simply want to offer some thoughts and suggestions about the meaning of the day, in the hope that they may stimulate your own thinking as you plan a sermon or a class for Pentecost.

A Time for Thanksgiving

As we know, the annual festival of Pentecost celebrated the spring grain harvest. In ancient Israel, a predominantly agricultural society, this festival was the occasion for rejoicing and thanking the Lord God for providing food for the coming season—an easy concept for us to understand, except for one thing: many of us have not grown up around farming and farmers, and our understanding may be more theoretical than experiential.

My parents both grew up on farms, but they became teachers and I grew up in the suburbs. For me, “the farm” was a wonderful place to visit and explore as a child. My first real experience of farming came when I taught at Sterling College, Kansas, which sits right in the middle of endless wheat fields waving in the wind. One mid-June evening, a week or so before the wheat harvest was due to begin, I was chatting with a long-time resident. The temperature had gone down a bit from the heat of the day—down to 92 degrees, that is. The farmer sighed as he said, “This is wonderful weather. It feels good deep down in my bones.” A wheat harvest is only successful if temperatures are in the upper 90s and the humidity is low. Cool temperatures or a passing thunderstorm can ruin the entire crop. But when the harvest comes in successfully, it’s a time to celebrate, and my Sterling neighbors certainly thanked the Lord God for gracious and abundant blessings.

That’s what Israel felt, and that’s why they celebrated Pentecost. Even if we are not part of the farming industry, we can relate to these feelings. Celebrations such as the birth of a child, graduation from school, a marriage, or a 50th wedding anniversary can all bring joy and thanksgiving. When we feel a sense of thankfulness welling up inside us, we come close to the experience of the early Israelites at Pentecost, as they gave thanks to the Lord and sang praises to God’s name.

A Day of Surprise

When the disciples were together for the Pentecost festival, their usual joy and thanksgiving must have included much more than the ingathering of the harvest. Just a few weeks earlier, they had experienced Jesus’ dramatic entrance into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, when a crowd rejoiced and praised him as the long-awaited Messiah. But during the week the atmosphere changed rapidly. Tensions in the city and hints of threats mounted, until Jesus—like many others since then—was arrested under cover of darkness and condemned at a mock trial. When he died on the cross, the disciples’ joy and hope died too, until, unbelievably, they discovered that he was alive again!

For the next 40 days, the disciples must have lived in a daze of emotions, from joy to marvel to thanksgiving. There must have been some fear, too, as they wondered what the authorities might do. Probably they stayed in the relative safety of that upper room much of the time, but once the uproar

over Jesus' death had died down, the disciples felt comfortable enough in public to attend the Pentecost celebration with the rest of the city. With foreigners from many lands in attendance, they were just one more group of anonymous folks in the large crowds praising God that day.

But, as Acts 2 tells us, they weren't destined to stay anonymous very long. The roaring wind, the tongues of fire, the proclamation in many languages drew attention. The disciples must have been as stunned as everyone else, but they were aware that this was from God, and they couldn't stop it whether they wanted to or not.

Every now and then in Acts, Luke inserts a subtle touch of humor. Here we get it in the reaction of the crowds to this strange sight. I imagine how it would be described on our local channels in Pittsburgh, KDKA-TV, WPXI, or WTAE. Their news reporters would be on the scene with cameras rolling and microphones at the ready: "What do you make of this?" And the answers would come back:

"I don't know."

"Makes no sense to me."

"Well, I know they're Galileans, but they're speaking my language."

"Ah, they've just been drinking too much."

Of course, that's the line that would appear last in the interviews on the 6:00 news. It's the line that Luke puts last too.

Pentecost is just the first of numerous times that the Spirit will surprise the disciples in Acts, and many later disciples throughout Christian history, when they experience something unexpected. This is what Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3:8 about the "wind/spirit blowing where it will."

Simon Peter's Finest Hour

Possibly the disciples weren't really aware of this development, but Jesus' resurrection had changed them. Luke demonstrates this change in depicting Peter as he addressed the crowd. Proclaiming a convicted criminal—one who had just been crucified—as the resurrected Messiah is a courageous move. It is just the opposite of Peter's earlier denials of any connection to Jesus in Luke 22. Peter's courage shows that he will now truly become the leader of the disciples.

Peter's message is masterful, too, as he responds to the charge of drunkenness with the obvious observation that it is only 9:00 a.m. Then, after connecting this astounding event to Joel's prophecy about the end-time outpouring of the Spirit, Peter proclaims that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Messiah and that the unlawful events surrounding his death were part of God's plan. Nevertheless, Peter asserts, Jesus was righteous, and God has raised him from the dead. Peter's courage is evident in his straightforward assertion that he and the other disciples are witnesses to the resurrection.

Peter's courage also appears as he directly accuses the audience of participating in the crucifixion (2:23, 36). Their actions make them guilty of killing the Messiah, the "Holy One" (2:27) who now sits at God's right hand (2:33). But Peter does not end there. Echoing the last words he has quoted from Joel ("whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved"), he encourages his audience to repent of their deeds and to be baptized in the name of Jesus (2:38). Then forgiveness will be theirs, as will this gift of the Holy Spirit. Later New Testament writers will make it clear that we, too, are in the position of Peter's audience. Our own actions have helped nail Jesus to the cross—and, by God's grace, faith in Jesus will bring about our forgiveness and new life in his Spirit.

This particular Pentecost began with people from many different nations hearing their own tongues spoken. Peter closes his sermon with the assurance that the promise of forgiveness and the Spirit relates to all of them. It is for “you and your children and for all who are far off ...” (2:39). In the rest of Acts, Luke draws out the implication here: the gospel will now be proclaimed in the entire world, and all people alike can receive it on an equal footing.

Pentecost is about Faith in the Lord Jesus

In our church calendar of events, Pentecost is sometimes celebrated as though it is the Holy Spirit’s day. That’s not wrong exactly, but it’s incomplete. To be sure, Pentecost is about the giving of the Spirit. But notice that Peter’s sermon emphasizes that the purpose of the day is for people to “call on the name of the Lord.” He spends much of his address not on the Spirit, but on the identity of Jesus and God’s work through Him. This feature fits with what theologians have sometimes referred to as the hiddenness of the third person in the Trinity. The acts of the Spirit are not intended to draw attention to the Spirit but to point toward the Son, the One who has become visible by taking on human nature.

Essentially, Pentecost is about faith in Jesus. It’s about joy and thankfulness because of God’s gift of forgiveness and new life. It’s a time to call on the name of the Lord, or better perhaps, to call *again* on the name of the Lord. As we celebrate the coming of Christ’s Spirit, Pentecost calls us to renew our faith and to commit ourselves once again to trusting in Jesus Christ. That piece is crucial to include as we appeal to God at Pentecost to pour out the Spirit on and into our hearts once again.