

The Mission of the Church
Acts 2:1-11 and John 20:19-23
June 8, 2014
Pentecost Sunday

Pentecost is often called the birthday of the Christian Church. As such, it is celebrated throughout the world. Churches, both individual and communally connected, have found many ways to celebrate this day. For example, in many Christian denominations, the members are encouraged to wear a piece of red clothing. Many denominations have some sort of fellowship like a covered dish dinner or a birthday cake and lemonade. Some churches have processions with banners and red streamers. At one time, it is not considered to be ecologically responsible today, red helium balloons were given to every member as they exited the church. Everyone was to gather on the front lawn and at the count of three, release the balloons into the air. Of course, everyone would stare and watch the balloons rise into the sky and disappear. While I enjoy celebrations, it seems that we started to spend more time in finding new ways to celebrate this day than we did in trying to understand the meaning of this day. Somehow the meaning of Pentecost started to be secondary to the means by which we celebrated it.

If that is the case, then what is the meaning to the church, to us, today of Pentecost. To determine the answer, it is important for us to know what happened to the disciples when they received the Holy Spirit in the reading this morning. It is important for us to recognize that the reading from Acts and the reading from John differ as to when the disciples received the Holy Spirit. They also differ as to the events surrounding the reception of the gift. What is important to note is that the meaning behind the two events is still the same.

In the reading from John's Gospel, Jesus appears to the disciples. It is the evening of the day of the resurrection, Easter. The disciples have locked themselves in a home because they are afraid of the Jewish leaders. Jesus appears to them. The first words he says are "Peace be with you." He has just conferred upon them the blessing of peace that he had promised in his farewell discourse to them in chapter 14. His first promise to his disciples has been fulfilled. Then he shows them his wounds so that they can see for themselves that it is indeed He. They became filled with joy. Once again he says to them, "Peace be with you", and says immediately, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." With those words he breathes on them and then says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." The second promise has now been fulfilled. They have received the Holy Spirit as Jesus breathes on them. We should be mindful of the readings in Genesis where God breathed life into Adam and Eve, into humanity. Jesus is not breathing physical life into the disciples. He is breathing new life in the power of the Holy Spirit. This new life is given as they are commissioned to go into the world, as Christ was sent into the world. They are to share the love and the teachings that they have received from Jesus. To do the task, they have received the presence of the Holy Spirit within them. With the presence of God's Spirit, they are strengthened and empowered to teach, to preach, to bear up against persecution, and to forgive. Anyone who receives them receives the gift of the Holy Spirit from them. They find themselves forgiven. They are forgiven of following false gods and false ways, and following the love of God offered to them through Christ our Lord. What we see in this reading is that Easter and Pentecost are one and the same. All the promises of Christ have been received on the same day. The gift of the Spirit is to be empowered to go into the world.

What about the reading from Acts? The events in Acts are probably the ones we think of when we hear the word Pentecost. In Luke's tradition, the disciples had been told by Jesus to go to Jerusalem and wait to receive power from on high, the power of the Holy Spirit. On the fiftieth day after the Resurrection,

there was a festival in Jerusalem, Pentecost. Yes, Pentecost was a Jewish festival called Shavuot. It was a one day festival celebrating the late spring harvest and the giving of Torah at Sinai. It was to be observed fifty days after Passover. The Jewish people would come from all over the Mediterranean to celebrate the festival.

As we know, the disciples were together. Suddenly, they heard a rushing wind that filled the whole house. Once again we should think back to the creation narrative in Genesis where the Spirit of God hovered over the waters. Tongues of fire appeared. They separated and stopped over the head of each disciple present. The Holy Spirit came upon them and they began to speak in other languages. They were not speaking in tongues. They were literally speaking in other languages. Filled with uncontrollable joy, they burst out into the street. The people in the street could understand them for the languages they were speaking were understood by those who had come for the festival. In these languages, the disciples were sharing the story of Jesus Christ who lived, died and has risen.

What was the purpose of the receiving of the Holy Spirit? It was to encourage and empower the disciples to teach, to preach and to share the story of Christ to all whom would hear. What we see in these two stories are two accounts of how the disciples received the Holy Spirit. What we also see is the same result when they received the Holy Spirit.

Jesus had promised them they would receive the Holy Spirit from God the father. The Spirit would be their comforter, their advocate, their teacher and a source of strength. If we take a moment, we can see how the Holy Spirit would help the disciples in all of these ways. First of all, the Holy Spirit would comfort them. In the absence of Christ it would become easy to be saddened, mournful and in despair. The Holy Spirit would be present to remind them that Jesus is alive. The Spirit would comfort them in their daily walk with Christ when they couldn't feel Christ's presence.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit would be their advocate. The first disciples faced challenges that many Christians today have never faced. Because of their belief and the beliefs of the Roman Empire, the disciples would be arrested, tried, persecuted, and even killed. At all times, the Holy Spirit would be with them giving them the words to say before their captives and accusers. Standing beside them and dwelling within them as they were imprisoned or worse. While they may not have had any physical companions with them, Jesus was always with them in the presence of the Holy Spirit. They were enabled to teach and preach. One aspect of the reading in Acts is that they were able to see that God was willing to give them whatever was needed at the time to have the message of love conveyed to others. They didn't have to worry about how God would use them to teach. All they had to do was step out in faith. God would provide the way to teach and preach. Finally, the Holy Spirit would be their strength. The world was going to do everything it could to stop them sharing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The disciples received strength through the Spirit for the task ahead of them. Many journeys would be taken by the disciples. It requires strength to go on a journey to be a teacher and preacher. It requires strength to share a story that, even in Paul's own words, the Jews will demand miracles and the Greeks wisdom. The story of Christ does have miracles, but they are not what the Jews were hoping to see. Their story of Christ does contain wisdom, but it doesn't make sense to a people who believe that gods would never do what God in Christ has done. In order to stay the course, strength in spirit and in body is required. The Holy Spirit of God offers both to those who believe. As the Gospel of Christ is received, the disciples are to forgive. When a person receives the Gospel of Christ into their own hearts and lives, the Holy Spirit forgives them and they are offered the eternal life found in Jesus Christ.

As we can see what happened to the disciples upon receiving the Holy Spirit is the same in both readings. They became filled with joy and went out into the world to share the Gospel and forgive. If we are to take this gift from God seriously, then we are to recognize that we have also received this gift from God. We claim to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord. We claim he was alive, crucified, dead and buried and resurrected. We claim to be followers of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. We claim through our Baptism and Confirmation that we have received the Holy Spirit within us. In short, we state emphatically that God has breathed on us. If that is indeed what we believe then we also have to accept and claim that we are to go in to the world and share the Gospel of Christ in the world around us. Yes, today we celebrate the birthday of the Christian Church. We also accept the commissioning of Christ to go into the world and share the Gospel. We have nothing to fear. As we accepted the Holy Spirit, we also accepted the presence of the comforter, the advocate, the teacher and the strengthener. We are never, ever alone. Amen.