

Acts 2:1-21

¹When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?’ ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?

⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ ¹³But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ “In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out 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.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Pentecost: From Apprehension to Comprehension

Today is Pentecost, and a lot of people don’t know much about Pentecost. In Jewish tradition it was known as Shavuot which commemorated God’s giving of the Law to the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai. In Christian tradition it is the day it comes 10 days after Jesus’ ascension and commemorates the day Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to his disciples. It’s helpful to remember this difference in tradition because it points to one of the biggest distinctions between Judaism and Christianity; a good Jew dedicates her life to following the Law (Torah), while a good Christian dedicates her life to living by the Holy Spirit, the

Spirit of God. When you trace the history of Christianity, it was this difference that led to the separation of Christians from Judaism.

A lot of Christians will say that what distinguishes them from their Jewish friends is “belief in Jesus,” that is, the belief that Jesus was God’s only Son who came and died and was resurrected to save us from sin and death, but we shouldn’t reduce our faith to a simple creed. To say that a Jew is someone who believes that God’s Law is sacred doesn’t do justice to Judaism. Likewise to say that a Christian is someone who believes that Jesus was God’s Son doesn’t do justice to Christianity. We need to understand that belief means so much more than simply acknowledging some fact. When we speak about belief in something as important as God we must understand that belief is something that defines our whole life, because God is not someone you can diminish. You can’t put God in a little box and say, “There’s God. I sure believe in him.” If you believe that God is creator of all things, that he is intimately involved in our lives and human history, then it is unacceptable to treat God as some mere fact. If you believe that God is involved in your life then you ought to be involved in God’s life. You have to see that you have a relationship with God that needs to be cultivated and sustained.

And here it’s helpful to talk about the Pentecostal Church, which sprang from the Pentecostal Movement which relates to the day of Pentecost which was described in our scripture lesson this morning. Pentecost is celebrated as the birthday of the church, because it was the day that the Holy Spirit came down and landed on the disciples and caused all sorts of strange things to happen, the gist of which was that the disciples came out of their hiding place (remember that they were still afraid that they too might end up getting crucified) and started to tell people about Jesus and the Resurrection. If I could state in simple terms what happened I would say that the disciples apprehension turned into comprehension. Apprehend and comprehend both mean something similar; to understand. But to apprehend is simply to understand that something happened while to comprehend is to understand what that event means. The disciples had seen the Risen Lord; Mary and Peter and John and Thomas and so many others had seen Jesus alive after his crucifixion, but they had only apprehended him. On Pentecost we could say that they comprehended him. They understood what the Resurrection meant, and that insight gave them the courage to come out of their hiding place and start to preach.

So the Pentecostal movement was considered something similar. Many churches had become dead in the sense that their “belief” in Jesus was reduced to a creed or a doctrine. “Yes, I believe Jesus was the Son of God who died for my sins and rose on Easter morning.” Many Christians thought it was all about belief in these facts but did not comprehend the full meaning of them. The Pentecostals celebrate the fact that God’s Spirit is alive and active in us. Jesus died; Jesus rose; and because that means something those truths must be proclaimed. The Pentecostals deserve credit for celebrating that God is alive and present in the Church.

The funny thing is that we Methodists were once considered Pentecostal. This Thursday is what Methodists recognize as Aldersgate Day (it’s on your calendar in the newsletter), and it commemorates the day that John Wesley really began in earnest the

Methodist movement, which really was a Pentecostal movement. John Wesley and his friends were not satisfied with the state of the Church in England in the eighteenth century. It was dead. There was no evangelistic fervor. There was no sense of mission. And so Wesley and his friends formed holiness clubs that were about living a disciplined Christian life – attending prayer groups and covenant groups, visiting prisons and orphanages and hospitals, and of course attending church regularly. But Wesley was discouraged because most of the church could care less about his ministry. In hindsight John Wesley realized that he did not have a sense of his own salvation. He didn't feel connected to God. He felt like he was going through the motions and he wondered what for. He was in a funk. So according to his journal, he was invited to attend a Bible Study at a Moravian chapel on Aldersgate Street in London, and it was there, while someone was reading the preface to Martin Luther's commentary on the Epistle to the Romans that John Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed. Wesley writes:

I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Something clicked, and Wesley finally “got it.” The Holy Spirit had led him to comprehend that he was “saved” by Jesus Christ. And we'd say the rest is history. Wesley went out preaching to the masses and inspiring hundreds of others to do the same. It was a time when the church was re-awakened. The Holy Spirit had come down once again to charge up these Methodists and send them out into the world to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

Now if you feel that you could use a little of that Spirit to get you more excited about Jesus Christ or to give you some assurance that you indeed are “saved,” you're probably asking yourself, “What exactly did Luther's preface to his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans say?” And in hope that I may be of some help in igniting a flame in you, I would say that the core message was GRACE, and grace is a gift offered freely. Christ died for our salvation, and that is the good news. The work is done, and as Peter quotes the prophet Joel, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” The difficulty we have is that we want to see God as a vender, and so when we read that phrase we think, “Okay, in order to be saved I must call on the name of the Lord.” But when we turn that phrase into a conditional transaction (I call; God saves) we take love out of the equation and we destroy the whole notion of grace. Salvation is no longer a free gift; it's something we must earn. Christ died for us, and that's all. That's grace. A child falls off his bicycle and calls to his mother for help. That child is not thinking “if I cry to my mother she will dress my wounds.” It's more instinctual than that. A child knows his mother's love. A child trusts his mother to care for him. So his call is not a business transaction; it's an expression of trust. We should be able to look at the cross knowing that Jesus died for us and say, “I trust in God.” That's grace.

May the good news of God's grace work within you this Pentecost. May you gain the assurance that John Wesley received, to know that Christ has taken away your sins,

even yours, and may your life be so transformed that you would be excited and boldly share such good news with those around you.