

FIRST LESSON: Joel 2:28-32
SECOND LESSON: Acts 2:1-21
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“The True Power of Pentecost”

Sermon © Lisa C Farrell

A Baptist preacher and his wife decided they needed a dog. Ever mindful of the conservative nature of their congregation, they knew the dog must also be Baptist. They visited an expensive kennel and explained their needs to the manager, who assured them he had just the dog for them.

When the dog was produced, the manager began giving it commands. “Fetch the Bible,” he commanded. The dog bounced to the bookshelf, scrutinized the books, located the Bible, and brought it to the manager. The manager then said, “Find Psalm 23.” The dog, showing marvelous dexterity with his paws, leafed thru the Bible, found the correct passage, and pointed to it with his paw. Duly impressed, the preacher and his wife purchased the dog. That evening a group of parishioners came to visit. The preacher and his wife began to show off the dog, having him locate several Bible verses. The visitors were amazed.

Finally, one man asked “Can the dog do normal dog tricks too?”

I don’t know. Let’s see,” said the preacher. Pointing his finger at the dog, he commanded, “Heel!”

The dog immediately jumped up on a chair, placed one paw on the preacher’s forehead and began to howl. The preacher turned to his wife in complete shock and disbelief and said, “We’ve been swindled! They sold us a Pentecostal dog!”

I’ve got Presbyterian dogs myself. When we’re all together we constitute a committee.

There’s Pentecost, and there’s Pentecostals. We know from experience that they’re not the same thing. Even the most “un-Pentecostal” of churches celebrate Pentecost. And interestingly enough, some independent charismatic and Pentecostal churches deliberately DO NOT celebrate Pentecost because they don’t follow the Church calendar. They feel it should be Pentecost every Sunday. To a *certain extent* they are right, but in another sense, they are missing the unique nature of that first Pentecost. Although the Holy Spirit is with us and miracles of tongues, prophecy and healing *do* happen, (don’t faint, Presbyterians, they do) that day has never been repeated. Despite the fact that speaking in tongues still happens, there are no other documented occasions of congregations proclaiming the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit to complete strangers in their own languages. Occasionally claims are made that a person spoke in tongues in a known language. But essentially the first

Pentecost was a unique event. It was the birth of the Church. It is for this reason I was so happy we could come back together as a congregation in person on Pentecost. Pentecost is a new beginning.

Being good Jews, the disciples had been up all night reading scripture and praying on Pentecost. About 9 in the morning, something happened. There are no adequate words to describe it. A sound like a rushing wind was heard, and tongues “as of fire” settled on the people. They found themselves overwhelmed with joy and compelled to preach the good news of Jesus to all of the visitors in Jerusalem. But it was when they opened their mouths that the most amazing thing happened. They started proclaiming the good news, in languages they did not know. Jews from all over the world heard about Jesus in their native languages. Of course, when many people speak at once it can sound like babbling to those who do not take the time to listen and so some dismissed them as drunk at nine o’clock in the morning.

Why did God do this? Why such a powerful experience of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost? To return to the mundane for a moment, Pentecost means “fifty.” It’s a Jewish holiday, coming fifty days after Passover. Basically, it’s a week of weeks. Pentecost was originally a festival marking the first grain harvest, sort of a “first fruits” celebration. At a later point a new meaning was added. The Law was given to Moses at the same time of the year as Pentecost, and as a result, Pentecost also came to be a festival of thanksgiving for the Torah. In the Christian celebration of Pentecost there is a third celebration added—the first fruits of the kingdom of God in the form of all those who came to faith that day. We celebrate Jesus who in his person replaced the Law as a means of restoring us to God, bringing grace and forgiveness through the cross.

We Presbyterians are not known for wild enthusiasm. Presbyterians pride themselves on doing things “decently and in order.” Pentecost might have been decent, but I doubt there was a whole lot of order going on. As shocking as this might be, God apparently does not care about being tidy! Three thousand people came to faith in Jesus that day. It was the first fruits of a huge harvest yet to come. The New Covenant of grace replaced the Old Covenant of law. It was joyful chaos, and God’s timing was perfect.

“Going Pentecostal” is for the whole church, not just for Pentecostal churches or mega-churches. In fact, sometimes mega-churches go against the Spirit of Pentecost. Mega churches and televangelists have made a study of crowds and often employ techniques that are essentially manipulative in nature. Everything from the pace of the music timed in such a way that it can actually induce hypnotic states to using all kinds of special effects to keep people’s attention and hinder critical thinking. Then they pass the offering plate around three times. Revivals are advertised guaranteeing nightly miracles. I know this is not the world most people at Penn Wynne inhabit, but it is out there and it is very real.

While every denomination in America right now is experiencing what has been termed “churn,” that is a constant turnover of membership as people keep “shopping” for new and different religious experiences or they are simply forced to relocate for reasons of employment, believe it or not these large non-denominational charismatic or Pentecostal churches have the highest rate of “churn”—about a 50% turnover every five years. Most people don’t even make it

a year before they've gotten bored and moved on. If people are coming to Church for entertainment, eventually they get tired of the same old same old, regardless of what it is.

An emotional high resulting from a carefully choreographed service can mimic the work of the Holy Spirit—at least at the emotional level. It cannot mimic the work of the Holy Spirit in terms of changed lives. People need the real Jesus and real healing. But clinging to a form of worship that is no longer is comprehensible to the general public is a mistake too. “We’ve always done it this way” is not a good method. Whatever we do, as members of the body of Christ we are called to **active service**, not *passive sitting*. Christianity is not a spectator sport. We have been given the awesome responsibility of *reaching out* to the society we live in with the good news of God’s love in Christ. The Church isn’t here to entertain. It’s here to make disciples, and a true experience of the Holy Spirit carries us through the depths as well as into the heights. The true power of Pentecost is the power to change lives. Amen.

Joel 2:28-32

28 “And afterward,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.

29 Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

30 I will show wonders in the heavens
and on the earth,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

31 The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

32 And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved;
for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem
there will be deliverance,
as the Lord has said,
even among the survivors
whom the Lord calls.

Acts 2:1-21

2 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. **2** Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. **3** They saw what seemed to

be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning!¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ “In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

¹⁹ I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

²⁰ The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

²¹ And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.’