



University Christian Church- Austin

C. Kutz-Marks

## What Pentecost Means

Pentecost b, May 31, 2009

Acts 2:1-21

Today we celebrate Pentecost, the rowdy, rambunctious, roaring in of the Holy Spirit to empower the tiny, struggling Christian community based in Jerusalem.

Now, originally Pentecost was a much tamer Jewish agrarian festival that drew many back to Jerusalem each year-- the celebration of the grain harvest, much like our Thanksgiving celebration. Later Pentecost became much more as the Jewish tradition<sup>i</sup> grew around it. Today Pentecost, or Shavuot (shə-vū'ōt) as it is known in Hebrew<sup>ii</sup>, is joyfully celebrated in the Jewish community as **the day when God gave the Torah -- the law**. The importance of the festival can be seen by looking at the many traditions and events that are associated with it<sup>iii</sup>

-in Jewish tradition it was the Day of Pentecost when **Cain and Abel** offered their sacrifices before God;

- it was the Day of Pentecost when **Noah made his sacrifice**, and God placed a rainbow in the heavens as a sign of the new covenant;

- and it was the Day of Pentecost when **Hannah offered up her prayer** and dedicated her miracle child, Samuel, to the service of the Lord.

And so you see in the Jewish tradition this was no ordinary day, **it was a season of beginnings**. In Christian tradition it is also a day of

beginnings. Pentecost is often called the "birthday of the Christian church." As reflected in the reading today, it is the day when the Holy Spirit was given to the Church, and the disciples came out from behind their locked doors, and began proclaiming the message despite the ever-present threat of the Roman retribution. **So it is clear that one of the meanings of Pentecost is the BIRTH OF THE COURAGE TO BE CHRISTIAN, the courage to face any challenge that the world around throws at us.... Always and everywhere secure... secure in one's relationship with God.**

Now, because of its history, this day in the life of the church runs the risk of expecting too much... But Pentecost doesn't require that we somehow need to recreate the "rush of the wind," or the "tongues of flame," as if that is the only true sign of a genuine Christian people. If there is anything that is required of us today, it is not so much the experience of the spectacular, but rather, the sign of the Holy Spirit present is in our going out to touch the lives of others so they, too, may know the joy, the peace, and the purpose that fills the lives of those who follow Jesus.

Anglican Bishop Dr. Leslie Hunter recounted a dream he had experienced, that informs our understanding of this day.... "The dreamer entered a spacious store in which the gifts of God were kept, and behind the counter was an angel. In his dream the would-be purchaser said, 'I have run out of the fruits of the Spirit. Can you restock me?' When the angel seemed about to refuse, the dreamer angrily burst out, 'In place of war, injustice, lying, hate, tyranny, I want love, joy, peace, integrity.... Without these I shall be lost.' But the angel behind the counter replied, 'Sorry, we do not stock fruits of the Spirit. We only keep seed.'

The gifts of God's Holy Spirit are given to us mostly in just such an embryonic form: seeds that must be prompted to grow by the nurture we

provide. We pray "Come Holy Spirit, Come...." remembering that the Spirit came once upon a time to our spiritual ancestors, but also remembering that **second meaning of Pentecost: that the Holy Spirit is also here amongst us TODAY, SHAPING THE LIVES OF PEOPLE**, who have made a faith commitment; and shaping our lives, with the call to follow that we may grow the fruits of the Spirit wherever we may go: love, joy, peace, integrity, shalom wherever we go, fruits of the Spirit that also bear in themselves the seeds for another generation.

Jesus said that Holy Spirit was sent as an "Advocate," and as a "Helper," to care for us, and to oversee the life of the church. The Spirit was not sent to destroy or to harm us -- the Spirit of God is as gentle as the breath we receive at life, and the warmth and moist breath of a mother cooing to her child. Such a quiet image may pale beside stories of rushing wind and tongues of flame, but it is entirely appropriate as we enter Pentecost – for **clearly the deep meaning of Pentecost is that of birth - and new life.**

That birth can take all sorts of forms, but Christian theology emphasizes

the creation of **faith out of the chaos of emotional and intellectual confusion;**

the creation of **unity out of disorder,** and

the **creation of universality out of parochialism.** That is to say, the Holy Spirit wants us **to love everybody.** The loving Spirit of God is like a huge fishing net flung over the face of the whole earth that captures every shape and variety of human being on this planet and the pulls us all in— gently, slowly, so as not to lose even one -- so we that may be nourished by the life giving Spirit of God. That is how the Holy Spirit works.

But, frankly, it seems to me that we often aren't ready for this kind of community. We'd prefer to have things run on our terms, done in our way.

When the Spirit was in charge, did you note how the tongues of fire were distributed? It wasn't great big tongue of fire, like some Persian carpet from the sky, that fell upon everybody. It was *individual, different* tongues of fire, for each different person.

The Spirit didn't descend, and suddenly everyone spoke the King's English, or even Esperanto.

The Spirit didn't descend and say, now that you are enlightened, you will always vote the straight Democratic ticket, nor did the Spirit say, you will always vote the straight Republican ticket.

The Spirit didn't descend and make everybody dress alike, as if they'd all just walked out of the same Macy's. No.

It seems to me that the Holy Spirit is showing a **preference for diversity** in the people of God, that is more inclusive than we would even want to be. Sure we want other folks to come along with us, but, on our terms.

We may see this so clearly in how multinational corporations work, but if we were to look at our personal relationship, friends, we'd find the same truth there, too. Being moved to provide for another's welfare, to love them, implies a readiness to listen to them, and to carefully translate our Christian message of hope and salvation to other individuals and other cultures. There are a multitude of stories from the world of business that demonstrate what happens when a business is NOT culturally sensitive.

When Coca-Cola first went into China, they were determined to use a symbol that phonetically represented the sounds of their name in English. It was only after their marketing campaign was a total failure that Coke

learned that their new Chinese name translated, 'Bite the wax tadpole.' When they changed their name to mean, 'May the mouth rejoice,' they began to sell some Coca-Cola.

Coke's archrival, Pepsi made their own gaff nearby. Pepsi's campaign in Taiwan translated the invitation in English to 'Come alive with Pepsi' into 'Pepsi brings your ancestors back alive from the grave.'<sup>iv</sup>

While humorous, there are very real problems that devolve from a company that doesn't do its cultural homework well. The results can thoroughly undermine their plans. Tomorrow we are likely to see the filing of bankruptcy of General Motors. The list of reasons for their failure is long, but one example is illustrative. When Chevrolet took their sporty Nova model to Latin America insisting on maintaining the English name for the car, they neglected to understand the fact that the name, NO VA, means 'Will not go' in Spanish. Not many folks were interested in that kind of car!

And another giant corporation had its share of missteps. In 1986, Eastern Airlines moved more passengers than any airline in the world. 5 years later they were bankrupt. Many reasons were given, to be sure, but their insistence on saying 'We earn our wings daily' promised in Spanish that passengers would arrive at their destination as angels.'didn't help!

The Holy Spirit, it seems, is so much better than Madison Ave. in speaking the Divine message across the borders that normally separate us from one another. The coming of the Holy Spirit did nothing at all to abolish the amazing diversity of people in Jerusalem for the festival, but it allowed them to hear one another, to understand one another.

Pentecost was then God's marching order for the infant Christian Church in Jerusalem. I'm sure at the end of that magnificent day, the

disciples of Jesus were exhilarated, exhausted, and probably had some questions left about what was coming next.

Pentecost doesn't give all the answers, especially about what is coming next - but it does tell us that amidst the turmoil and the challenge, through the trials and the travails that God's Spirit is always going to be present for us, like the Wind, giving breath, giving life, giving strength; God's Spirit is always going to be present for us, as one author put it, "like the Fire that does not cease to burn, Consuming us with flames of love and peace, driving us out like sparks to set the world on fire."

Let us pray: "O God, into the pain of the tortured: breathe stillness. Into the hunger of the very poor: breathe fullness. Into the wounds of our planet: breathe well being. Into those who long for you: breathe your very Self...."  
Come Holy Spirit - Renew Your Whole Creation, we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. AMEN

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<sup>i</sup> The Book of Jubiles "**Jubilees, Book of.**" Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Deluxe Edition. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> ("Festival of the Weeks"), second of the three Pilgrim Festivals of the Jewish religious calendar. It was originally an agricultural festival, marking the beginning of the wheat harvest. During the Temple period, the first fruits of the harvest were brought to the Temple, and two loaves of bread made from the new wheat were offered. This aspect of the holiday is reflected in the custom of decorating the synagogue with fruits and flowers and in the names Yom ha-Bikkurim ("Day of the First Fruits") and Ḥag ha-Qazir ("Harvest Feast").

During rabbinic times the festival became associated with the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai, which is recounted in the Torah readings for the holiday. It became customary during Shavuot to study the Torah and to read the Book of Ruth.

Celebration of Shavuot occurs on the 50th day, or seven weeks, after the sheaf offering of the harvest celebrated during Passover. The holiday is therefore also called Pentecost from the Greek *pentēkostē* ("50th"). It falls on Sivan 6 (and Sivan 7 outside Israel).

"**Shavuot.**" Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Deluxe Edition. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009.

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<sup>iii</sup> Indebted to “The Wind and the Fire: Pentecost “ May 18, 1997 Ezekiel 37:1-14, Acts 2:1-21, May 18, 1997 , Govens Presbyterian Church

<sup>iv</sup> The Parker Pen unwittingly made even more extravagant claims in Flemish, asserting that their newly created leak-proof ink cartridges would prevent unwanted pregnancies.

<sup>v</sup> But perhaps most stunningly, Frank Perdue's slogan, 'It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken,' in Spanish announced that 'It takes a virile man to make a chicken affectionate.' --Pierce, "Can the Center Hold," Presidential Papers 10 (September 1994): 5-6. [http://www.beloitfcc.org/pdf\\_files/Advent%202007%20-%20Christmas%20Party%20Invitations%20\\_outline\\_.pdf](http://www.beloitfcc.org/pdf_files/Advent%202007%20-%20Christmas%20Party%20Invitations%20_outline_.pdf)