

31 May 2009

Pentecost Sunday*

I am certain that everyone knows what today is, it is the other holiday. The church calendar begins with the Advent of the Son and climaxes with the Advent of the Spirit, Pentecost. The Christian Pentecost is the seventh Sunday after Easter. The word literally means 50, and is celebrated not just by the Christians. One of the Jewish Holy Days is also at this same time; Shavuot is celebrated 50 days after Passover. We won't talk about the counting of Omer and the full extent of the holiday as celebrated in the Jewish tradition, but it marks the harvest of the wheat when everyone brought their harvest offering, and it also celebrates the day that Moses was given the Law. So this is actually a holiday that should be celebrated in a much more robust fashion by us as Christians for many reasons. -> **Note in this slide the poster denotes the Jewish celebration and the tableau says Happy Shavuot – the photo is a Shavuot celebration** <-

Peter J Leithart is Professor of Theology at New St Andrews College in Moscow, Idaho. His theology is actually far too conservative for me personally, but I do want to quote his description of our current celebration of the Pentecost. “We dress our kids up as shepherds, as Mary and Joseph, for the annual Christmas pageant. We put them in armor to be Roman soldiers at the tomb. But I've never seen a kid with a flaming head, speaking in tongues in a Sunday School play.” -> **This slide shows the personification of this statement; I am not one to ever criticize any traditions, this is only a question, but if the Bible says that the disciples spoke in tongues so that all understood – why have I never understood anything most of the Pentecostal churches are saying? Especially when they speak in tongues** <-

Why would a traditionalist theologian make a comment like the one I have just read? The answer is really pretty short and simple; Pentecost represents what would in our modern business terminology be called a major paradigm shift. The term paradigm shift comes from a book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, written by Thomas Kuhn in 1962. He defines it like this: scientific advancement is not evolutionary, but rather is a “series of peaceful interludes punctuated by intellectually violent revolutions,” and in those revolutions “one conceptual world view is replaced by another.” He goes on to say, “Think of a paradigm shift as a change from one way of thinking to another. It's a revolution, a transformation, a sort of metamorphosis. It just does not happen, but rather it is driven by agents of change.”

The passage we read today from the book of Acts talks to us about the winds and the fire and the fact that now all who were there heard in their own language. We use red today to represent the fire of the Holy Spirit. Just as Moses saw the burning bush as a symbol of God's presence, so we use red as a symbol not only of God's presence with us but also as a reminder of the coming of the Spirit on that Pentecost long ago. The original model, or paradigm, was that the Spirit of God of the Old Testament acted on and for the people of Israel. Now the paradigm is that God has descended and is with and within us. That's the shift. -> **slide 6 is the red of the Pentecost and 18th c representation** <- Consider John Chapter 14, verse 17: “Even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.”

One of the authors I often read is Barbara Brown Taylor; I like to think that I read her books again and again because she is a deep theological thinker, but it may be because of how colorfully she writes. She charges the church to share the Holy

Spirit throughout the entire world. The United Church of Christ uses the slogan “God is Still Speaking;” we have all been breathed upon by God. Consider Barbara Brown Taylor’s description: “He commissioned them by breathing on them, opening His mouth and pouring what was inside of Him into them so that their bangs flew and their eyelashes fluttered and they could smell where He had come from -- not just Golgotha and Galilee, but way before that -- back when the world itself was being born. Anyone standing there that evening with any memory at all could smell Eden on His breath: salt brine, river mud, calla lilies. They could feel their own lungs fill as they were brought back to life. It was Genesis reborn, as they were created all over again by the power of the Spirit that was coming out of His mouth.”

So too in our own time, at least if you are as old as I, we have seen a paradigm shift. -> **Barbara Brown Taylor’s quote represents a paradigm shift, given the statistic shown, the ownership of genes and genome pairs; there truly is another perhaps another paradigm shift** <- We have seen the shift into hardliner threats and charismatic churches claiming great gains in membership when the reality is church attendance has dropped significantly and young people are looking to fill their spiritual voids, and the hate that is being offered is easy and self-aggrandizing.

It is the church’s job to bring the Spirit into the world. It can do so by breathing life back into ideas that fear tried to kill. Jesus said that when the Spirit comes He will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment. It is the church’s job to bring the Spirit to bear on old orthodoxies, tired, worn-out prejudices, fear-based assessments of right and wrong, and claims by any group that their truth is the only truth. -> **Slide 8 is a representation of the fear-based paradigm** <- When the Spirit came to the disciples huddled in their locked room, it changed their world. The Spirit proves the world wrong about fear-based judgments and limiting beliefs. The Spirit breathes life into long-forgotten blessings, reminding us that we, also, have our origins in Eden.

We are a small church, but we too have had the opportunity to experience the God-given breath of life. We are a people no longer easily impressed: in an age of technological wonders, we’ve come to expect regular improvements in the “stuff” of our lives. What would it take then to *astonish* us? Would someone have to give those “things” up? I think we are a spiritual community that needs to celebrate loudly the opportunity for a new Pentecostal paradigm shift. What can we do to show the world that we are filled with the Holy Spirit? These are our beginnings, our “foundational story” of the new life. Are we living it or letting others mandate and control the life we live? The harvest festival of Pentecost, which also remembers the giving of the Law, now marks the giving of new life and the gift of the church, a new way of living for those who would follow Jesus in every land and in every age. Not just some kinds of people, but all different kinds of people, in all different places, different languages and customs, different cultures and backgrounds and experiences, different abilities and gender and races and orientations, all different kinds of people, beloved of God and filled with God's spirit, a new creation just as it could and ought to be.

Rebecca J. Kruger Gaudino makes an observation, “Peter seems to have forgotten what Jesus once said about new wine that bursts old wineskins (Luke 5:37-38). These new followers of Jesus are not filled with new wine. They are the new wine! Watch them burst the seams of convention.” Is she referring to us? Are we the new wine or would we rather sit comfortably in our seats. <- **In this last slide - yes those are Iraqi children taking communion – recently – and what a risk they take every day** <-

So does this mean we have to be out evangelizing the world, of course not? I hesitate to even use the word, evangelize, in this church; it has many bad connotations because of the way others have used it. I told the people at the SAMM shelter the other day that I knew the shelter was filled with the Holy Spirit, I knew because I could see it in the face of one of the children. I had expected to be depressed when I went to the shelter but instead the attitude and love the people have made

it incredibly uplifting. The residents were mostly devoid of things, but I realized it was I who needed an infusion of the Spirit. I invite all of you to take the opportunity to put Love to work, to show we too are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Births are rarely neat, tidy, or quiet, even when something beautiful is struggling to be born. The birth of the church is no different. The feast of Pentecost – of harvest – is an interesting time to think about pregnancy and birth, and the great crowd of converts is its own kind of harvest and yet leads to even greater possibilities of growth and new life. Our own church has the opportunity to move in new directions, to take new growth and outreach opportunities. As with birth, it may not be quiet or peaceful, it may even be painful, but it is exhilarating and good. Amen

***references to the accompanying PowerPoint presentation are set in blue font.**