

The Day of Pentecost: *Fanning the Flame of Mission*

June 12, 2011

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Readings: [Acts 2:1-21](#), [Psalm 104:25-35, 37](#), [1 Corinthians 12:3b-13](#), [John 20:19-23](#)

Today we celebrate the birthday of the church. Gathered together in one place, the disciples experienced a sudden outpouring of the spirit that impelled them to share the good news to all, no matter the language, or culture.... No matter if they were young or old, dark or fair... the message of Christ was heard. The disciples were as surprised as their audience, for moments before the outpouring of the Spirit, they were unable to speak all the various languages of those present.

Remember this was the Roman Empire, a truly cosmopolitan time. Trade from near and far took place in lively marketplaces where the full diversity of languages were spoken. From the middle east to what is now Spain, from Africa to Gaul, or what is now known as France, people traveled freely, exchanged ideas as well as goods, and a diversity of religions were tolerated and intermingled, except perhaps soon this new movement, known as The Way.

Pentecost is the inauguration of Jesus's true mission in this intermingling of races and cultures: "So that all may be one as I and my Father are one." It reverses the punishment that resulted from the pride exhibited by the builders of the Tower of Babel when languages were divided and the people were scattered across the earth. The dream of gathering together the full multiplicity of languages back into the original creative Word of God that was in the beginning had begun.

East and West, North and South, the dream of the Church would soon be to re-unite all in God's Word. But what does this mean? Is it the same as the Emperor Constantine's dream who declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire? You see Constantine literally had a dream on the eve of a battle. It was a message, that if he painted crosses on the shields of his soldiers they would be victorious. And they were. Is the cross the emblem of a military state, of a conquering empire? This is Christendom—spread not only by missionary preachers but also by the sword of colonial might; a unity enforced.

Constantine was also frustrated with the factions within the church in his empire. There were bitter disagreements particularly concerning the nature of Christ and his relationship to God and the Holy Spirit. So he gathered the Bishops and other representatives of the church together at Nicea. Under armed guard, they were forced to come to agreement so that there would be peace and concord in the church of the empire. The result was the Nicene Creed which we read in unison ever Sunday. Doctrine was born. Unity was maintained. Peace and Christendom could be spread throughout the empire.

Is that what Christ meant when he prayed that all may be one as he and his Father are one? Was this the true impulse of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as tongues of fire on the day of Pentecost. Is this the Way taught by Christ, to conquer other peoples and nations under the symbol of his agonizing death? I don't think so, but we need to sort through two thousand years of tradition to find the living spirit of the way.

St. Francis of Assisi faced the same problem when, more by example than preaching, he established his Order of Friars. Have you seen the film *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*? It is the story of St. Francis of Assisi and his brothers, as well as Clare of Assisi as directed by Franco Zeffirelli. A young Francis is told to rebuild the church, and, at first, he thought God meant the little, ruined church of San Damiano. But conflict soon arises in the town over his and his fellows lives as beggars. Did Christ really mean renounce all possessions and live free

as the birds of the air and the flowers of the field? So he decides to walk to the Vatican in Rome to ask Pope Innocent II (played by Alec Guinness) for his advice.

At the Vatican, Francis is stunned by the enormous wealth, power, greed and emptiness surrounding the throne of St. Peter. Even the vast ceiling above his head glitters with the sparkle of gems. When he is finally granted an audience, he protests against such pomp and worldliness and recites the Gospel (which is strictly forbidden) in order to prove that the Way of Christ is totally opposite to Rome's wealth. They are quickly ushered out of the Basilica and jailed for Francis' crime. But the Pope orders Francis and his companions brought back and, to everyone's astonishment declares that Francis puts them to shame, bows down and kisses Francis' feet, blesses them, wishing for them a long world-wide society of men and women willing to serve God according to the Gospel. Francis rejoiced and the end of the movie shows him and his brothers walking barefoot across the countryside.

Francis' may not be the path we wish to trod, but his spirit continues to renew the church.

Today, on the birthday of Christianity, we are the church gathered, struggling to be a living and relevant society of Christ's Way. We are surrounded by a world of indifferent people who care more about their new car than the words of Christ. We live in a world faced with the probability of cataclysmic climate change yet governments refuse to reduce CO2 production to sustainable limits and corporations certainly will not compromise profits. The birds of the air and the flowers of the field may not be so free anymore. We are surrounded by a world in which excess material consumption is far more important than living in service, following the example of Christ.

And we have inherited a church encrusted with the creedal formulas of Christendom. These formulas may embody tradition and exhibit poetry to some, but for many they obscure Christ's original teaching of the Way. We have inherited an exquisite church that seats 200 while we are lucky to be 30 or 40 on a Sunday. In the over 200 years of the history of this congregation, we have come to a place where we spend more time maintaining buildings and a cemetery than being a living, energetic, relevant example of Christ's living Way. This has begun to change in recent years with our increased outreach to the needy as well as our presentation of art and music. But we still spend so much time and energy maintaining the institution that mission tends to get short shrift.

It is time for a new Pentecost that renews the church, a new outpouring of the Spirit on this congregation so that the gifts we need as the Body of Christ are identified in our midst and tapped for ministry. A new spirit must be born in us today or we will fade into obscurity and these buildings and their purpose in mission will be lost and eventually become an empty shell.

I believe that we have the gifts in our midst to blossom into mission and growth once again. We need to look deeply into and through tradition and find the living relevance of Christ's Way for today. That relevance is a spark in the eyes, a fire in the hearts of each of us who come here on a Sunday morning. It has become a flame in the minds of those who are more active on the Vestry, the MST and attend adult religious education, serve on the Altar Guild, greet and read and even preach on Sunday morning, or work in the community kitchen on Monday nights. We need to keep tapping sparks, keep fanning the flames of gifts for ministry, so that we live into our mission with the power exhibited on that first day of Pentecost: to be a Christian community which celebrates God's inclusive love as expressed through Jesus the Christ. In this way, all may be one, not in conformity, not as a conquering empire, but in expressing the Word of life and love as the gifts aflame in our hearts compell us. Amen.