

Acts 2: 1-21; John 15: 26-27, 16: 4b-15
The Parting Gift

Less known to the world not concerned with the church calendar other than Christmas and Easter, Pentecost is truly a special day for the Church as the body of Christ in the world and for each Christian as a member of it. As the shorthand for this holy day, the “birthday of the Church” suggests, the prevailing sentiment today is that of celebration, with everyone wearing red; some churches go all out with “red potluck” or “red coffee hour” complete with red balloons.

That is all well and good...for an introduction to Pentecost in a Sunday school class. But the Scriptures tell us Pentecost is far more sobering and consequential than a birthday party. It thrust the followers of Jesus into an uncharted water that was bound to be stormy, and from this time forward, Jesus is not in the boat with them to calm the sea.

The event on Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit Jesus had promised to the disciples, ushered in a new era in God’s relationship with us, a new chapter in the saga that is God’s love story with God’s creation, with us in it. And we are more than birthday party guests.

So, what was going on in this scene Luke describes? On the day of Pentecost, why were these devout Jews from all over the world staying in Jerusalem? The disciples were there all together, because Jesus, before returning to God, had told them to wait there for the “promise of the Father,” the baptism by the Holy Spirit.

The word Pentecost means “the fiftieth” in Greek. It had nothing to do with the birth of the Christian church which didn’t exist yet. It was the Greek name for the ancient Jewish harvest festival more commonly known as the “Festival of Weeks” or Shavuot in Hebrew. It was over the 7 weeks beginning with the barley harvest on the second day after the beginning of Passover and ending with the wheat harvest.

Pentecost, as the fiftieth day after the offering of the first sheaf of the barley harvest, also celebrated the giving of the law to Moses at Mt. Sinai. The law is a gift that teaches God’s will to God’s people and helps them live by it. Pentecost was one of three pilgrimage feasts when the entire household of Israel gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the goodness of God to God’s people.

On that particular Day of Pentecost, those gathered for the feast witnessed another gracious act of God: the giving of the Holy Spirit, sounding like the rush of a wind appeared as

divided tongues, as of fire, and soon the disciples caught that fire as a tongue rested on each of them. That Spirit empowered them, the Galileans, who were known for their lack of linguistic talent, to speak of God's mighty acts for all to hear, regardless of the languages and where they were from. The Holy Spirit gave them the power that the disciples did not have, in order to make them witnesses to the works of God.

This was quite incomprehensible to some, and they pondered what it could mean, while it was literally incredible to others, and they wanted to explain it away as the effect of new wine. So, it was now Peter's time to speak up and tell them "what it meant." Peter told them, this was what the prophet Joel meant when he said, "In the last days," God will pour out God's Spirit upon all flesh, sons and daughters, the young and the old, even the slave, male and female, regardless of age, gender, social status, or any other human conditions.

Peter said what they were seeing and hearing with their own eyes and ears was what God had said God would do through the prophet "in the last days." He was saying, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, which they were witnessing, they had entered "in the last days," a new era in God's salvation history, when everyone who called on the name of the Lord would be saved.

This new era has spanned to reach the present time you and I live in. We are "in the last days" as Peter described it, for it began when God sent God's Spirit as the presence of the risen Christ in the world, falling afresh on us to melt and mold and fill and use us, as we seek to live out God's will, known in Jesus Christ. The gift of the Spirit on Pentecost came to fill our lives with purpose and meaning for the living of our days. We live to tell of the great saving love of God with our words and deeds as the Spirit makes us able, and the Church exists purely for this purpose. For this, we who have caught that fire are daily renewed.

Even though the disciples who received the Spirit on that particular day of Pentecost were all Jews and all men, the prophet Joel proclaims God's larger, more expansive vision of pouring God's Spirit upon all flesh, regardless of any human conditions. God is ever more inclusive and embracing of diversity in God's creation than our culture and society dare embrace. If so, then, the differences in our human conditions, whether it is the language or the culture, where we come from, or what place we hold in the society should not keep us from sharing the story of God's saving love with anyone God brings into our lives.

Luke is the only one who wrote about the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. But John in his Gospel gives us a more intimate picture of how Jesus prepared his disciples for the

coming of the Spirit, which was the same thing as preparing them for his departure from their midst.

You and I never had the pleasure of spending our days by Jesus' side, to witness him heal the wounded and the broken hearted, or to sit at his feet listening to his teaching, or watch him eat and drink and be merry with the rest of us as he did with his first disciples. So, we can only imagine the sadness of the disciples when Jesus told them he was going away. John reminds us that the Spirit would be sent for the disciples who were deeply dismayed at the thought of their beloved teacher departing from them. They were sorrowful and Jesus prompted them to look forward to the good that would come in the wake of his departure.

Hear now, the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to John. Listen, too, remembering what we've learned from John in the last weeks about how our relationship with Jesus reflects his relationship with God whom he calls Father. John 15: 26-27; 16: 4b-15. These are Jesus' parting words to the disciples before he was handed over to the power-that-be of the world.

26 'When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. 27You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. 4But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.

'I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. 5But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, "Where are you going?" 6But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. 7Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. 8And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement: 9about sin, because they do not believe in me; 10about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; 11about judgement, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

12 'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 13When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. 14He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. 15All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Jesus told them, "I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them." These things? What things? What hour?

So, here is the sobering part of otherwise festive Pentecost. Right before this passage, Jesus was telling his disciples about the hatred of the world and the persecution they would face. Remember, in John's Gospel, "the world" means "the forces of evil in the world that opposes

God and resists the Love of God that is coming to them,” because they do not know the Divine source of that love.

It would not always be easy to speak up and be on the side of the radical love of God in the world that rejects it, even hates it, especially in the absence of the teacher par excellence who showed them how. So, the Jesus spoke to them of the coming of the Spirit as Advocate, which in the original Greek word Paraclete means “one called alongside.” Those were Jesus’ parting words to the disciples and the promise of the Advocate, the Spirit of truth who would come alongside them to help them in place of Jesus, was Jesus’ parting gift to the disciples, and for us and the future generations.

And that was a gift that kept on giving into the last days, which is here today, empowering those of us who have caught the fire, to keep on keeping on testifying to the truth of God’s love that endures forever, in the world under the sway of hateful opposition to that love that is coming at them. So, listen to the Spirit and take notice, to discern who in our world is speaking and embodying love over hate, loving those whom Jesus loved, the weak and the wounded by the system of oppression and injustice. We are empowered by the Spirit to do that and join our forces of Love that is of God.

It is the spirit of truth who guides each generation along that way to uncover the grace and beauty in life. It is the Spirit of truth who teaches us to find God in the midst of life, to see life as Jesus taught us to see. It is the Spirit of truth who speaks in our hearts the presence of Jesus.

This is the task the believers in the risen Christ received on Pentecost, when they were all together in in one place, and the Church was born. Happy Birthday to us. And Thank God for the gift of the Advocate, our Comforter, that keeps us in the unity of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.