

Sermon on Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2009

Acts 2:1-21 & John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Lutheran Church of the Redeemer

By James Erlandson

Today as we celebrate the birthday of the Church, on this Day of Pentecost, and the Affirmation of Baptism by three of our young women here at Redeemer, I am torn between two themes. Should I preach on this day of celebration for the whole Church, with its gift of the Holy Spirit, or focus on this rite of passage for our confirmands as they continue their journey of faith, seeking the truth of God? Can I do both? How do I choose?

For this is certainly a day worth celebrating for the Church, when we thank God for the gift of faith which we receive from the Holy spirit, which guides us to the truth of God and gives us power to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. It is also a day worth celebrating as Ali, Amy, and Anne affirm their baptism and take another step towards adulthood and maturity in Christian faith. So I think I'll put both of these themes together into one sermon, because this is a day for all of us to celebrate our baptisms, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and our own journeys of faith as children of God.

This is a special day for me, not only because one of my daughters is making her affirmation of baptism. This is the first confirmation I have presided over for a class of students who were all baptized by me as babies here at this font. We have all watched you grow, from infants to toddlers to adolescents, you have been faithful worshippers here along with your families and been formed in your faith in Sunday School and confirmation, and shared in the Lord's Supper at this table. You have each taken your turns in serving at this altar as an acolyte, torchbearer, bannerbearer, and now as a reader of scripture. It has been a joy to see you grow in faith and maturity, as you have asked questions and also proclaimed God's Word for us in your own way. So we all ask God to bless you on your day of confirmation, and as we hear you profess your faith, we say "Praise the Lord!"

I don't expect you to remember this, but on the day that you were baptized, you received the gift of the Holy Spirit, as we all did when we were baptized. When you were baptized, I laid my hands on your head and asked God to sustain you with the gift of God's Holy Spirit, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in God's presence, both now and forever. What a great gift we have all received in baptism!

Remembering this gift leads us to recall the original gift of the Holy Spirit when it was first received, on the very first Pentecost, as described in our first lesson from the book of Acts. Here's what the scripture says: "*When the day of Pentecost had come, the [disciples] were all together in one place. And suddenly*

*from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”*

So what do we learn from this about the Spirit, the Church, and what God has empowered us and called us to do? Let’s remember why the apostles were gathered in the first place. They had just witnessed their risen Lord Jesus ascend to the Father in heaven – but first he had told them to go back to Jerusalem and wait for power from above. So they were all gathered in the upper room, waiting for something to happen – for Jesus to return, or to receive God’s gift of power. And the Spirit came upon them like the rush of a mighty wind, which cannot be controlled. But when they received this power of the Spirit, God did not let them stay in that room to wait for people to come to them. God sent them out, empowered as they were to speak the good news of God in the languages of people on the street. They hadn’t expected to be sent out – they had expected to wait for God to come to them. Maybe they hoped that people would come to them with their questions of faith. But that’s not the way it works, is it? So with this power of the Spirit to speak in the languages of the people who filled Jerusalem, they went out with enthusiasm and joy to tell the good news of the risen Lord Jesus to everyone who would listen.

So what can you and I learn from this story? Maybe it’s not to just sit here in this upper room to wait for people to come to us. God also sends us out into the world to share the good news of God’s love with others. We may not have the same gift of the Spirit which the apostles had, to speak languages which we do not know, but we have received power just the same, to learn to speak and to tell others the good news that we have heard. We also know that people don’t just come to hear the good news without first being invited and then welcomed by us. So we are called to go out and invite people to hear the good news that we have heard, and to experience the love that God has for them and for us.

But in order to invite people, and to tell the good news to others, we first have to know their language. Who are the people that we are called to meet, and to share God’s love with (and how shall we share it)? The world into which we are called, in the communities around us in St. Paul, is a place where people speak many languages. The schools which our children and confirmands attend in St. Paul are places where over 50 languages are spoken! It’s probably not reasonable for us to expect to learn these 50 languages in order to proclaim the gospel. But it is reasonable for God to expect us to speak the “language of love” – to show hospitality to our neighbors, to reach out with compassion, and welcome others without regard to race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, in the name of Jesus Christ, who welcomes us to his table. This language of love offers food to the

hungry and drink to the thirsty, a home to the homeless, care for the suffering, comfort to the grieving, and a place of welcome for the stranger.

Speaking of language, there are countless new languages which our young people are learning that some of us don't yet understand or use. Our confirmands are fluent in the languages of computers, cellphones, and Ipods. They know how to text, twitter, and communicate by email and on Facebook. They don't just sing hymns, they also do rap and hip hop. In textmessaging there is a shorthand "code" that young people use that I can't abide as yet, mixing letters with numerals as they write words like 2nite or 2day. I worry about whether my daughters will learn bad habits and forget how to spell; they say "not to worry" because they ace all their spelling tests and can turn this skill on and off at will. Our children can probably do homework, write on Facebook, talk on the phone and watch tv all at the same time – which they call "multi-tasking". (I think I'm multi-tasking when I take a walk and talk at the same time – which is nowhere near as complicated!) Just don't do this when you're driving is my constant prayer! So this is not your grandma's confirmation class – who may have learned the Small Catechism in German, Norwegian or Swedish. Our class learned to text message the creed on a cellphone, in their own words! This is a whole new generation, with new skills, new languages, new challenges, hopes, and fears. Some of us "old folks" and parents find ourselves alternately filled with fear and pride, foreboding and hope.

But we must always remember, our children have received the same gift as us – the gift of the Holy Spirit. They, too, have been baptized in the name of Jesus, and have been nourished at God's table of grace by Word and Sacrament. With faith we have nothing to fear, even though "to worry" seems our lot as parents! Instead, we have to learn to pass on leadership in the Church one day to them, and know that it is in good hands – the hands of God, led by those whom God has called. So we face the future with hope, faith, and confidence in this Church.

In the meantime, we need to find ways to empower our children, youth, and young adults to carry on the work of the Church, to share the good news of God's love in Christ Jesus which we have taught them over the years – and to learn from them. We can learn from our children how to communicate with those who have those technological skills that we don't have, who communicate in different ways than us, but who still value things of faith and seek the truth of God. For they are out there! And we can hold onto our hope in the future promises of God, who sends us out to share this hope with others. I close with this vision from Joel: [For]"*In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy...Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*"