

Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey
Pentecost Sunday - May 19, 2024
First Congregational UCC, Appleton WI
Acts 2:1-4

Pentecost really gets the short end of the liturgical stick. Consider Christmas and Easter. They are not merely holy days. They are holidays. They come with a whole host of spectacular celebrations - Christmas trees and Easter baskets and everything in between. Pentecost, on the other hand, does not get much traction in the greater culture.

Department stores do not stock Pentecost decorations. Children do not wake up on Pentecost morning giddy with expectation for the festivities to come. There's no Pentecost equivalent of Santa Claus or the Easter bunny, though Casper the Friendly Ghost could have been a contender back in the day. Frankly, I'm not sure many people even really know what Pentecost even is.

One church I served focused on the language part of the story. We shared space with a congregation that worshipped in Korean, and each year on Pentecost we worshiped together as a sign of Christian unity. We never really figured out how to make bilingual worship work, however. I was entertained by how bored the Korean speakers looked during the lengthy English portions of the service, and how bored the English speakers looked during the lengthy Korean portions of the service. Now, to be clear, a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual church miraculously united in faith and understanding is an awesome thing to celebrate. But considering that the original Day of Pentecost involved tongues of fire resting on the heads of the faithful, if your Pentecost worship is boring - you are doing it wrong.

Some congregations turn Pentecost into a birthday celebration, complete with streamers and cake. It is, after all, considered the birth of the church. Frankly, I'm surprised y'all don't go with this approach here, as it seems like this congregation jumps at any and every chance to serve cake!

In all honesty, even in the church, folks aren't always clear on why Pentecost matters. And despite the fact that it doesn't compete culturally with Christmas and Easter, theologically it is every bit as essential. It's the festival of the Holy Spirit, without which we would be dead on arrival.

A story. It was about ten minutes before worship was supposed to begin. My seminary classmates and I were shuffling into the chapel when our professor pulled two of them aside. I noticed looks of mild consternation on the faces of my friends. What could the professor be telling them that made them furrow their brows so tightly? Well, after the scripture reading, the two that had been pulled aside made their way up to the chancel. It turns out the professor had decided to play a round of what he called

“preach, pray, or die.” The idea is that any pastor worth his or her salt must be willing and able to preach, pray, or die at a moment’s notice.

Turns out the encounter I’d witnessed was my friends finding out they would be preaching to a sanctuary full of professional preachers, ten minutes later. I thought to myself, *wow, I could never do that.*

Only not long ago I did in fact have to do just that, when I stepped into the pulpit one morning only to discover that my carefully prepared sermon manuscript was nowhere to be found. There was no way I could run to the other building to fetch it from the copy machine tray, where I’d inadvertently left it. So I took a deep breath and came up with a new sermon on the spot.

This is what I learned that day: I am a flakey person that needs to triple check to make sure I remember all the details. But that isn’t the point of this anecdote, it’s probably just good intel to have about your new co-pastor.

But here’s the real point: I could preach, pray, or die, not because I had the skills or the courage or the competence to do so. I could preach, pray, or die because of the power and consent of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe that sounds like aww shucks false modesty. After all, we live in a culture that puts a high value on achievement and self-reliance. These values have precious little to do with the gospel, which tends to be more keen on surrender and humility.

Consider the day of Pentecost. The Spirit arrives with gale force, at once a wind and a flame. The Spirit’s first trick is translation - the Disciples are empowered to speak in languages they didn’t even know. You can’t even pretend to believe that they were somehow accomplishing this feat of their own volition. You cannot speak a language you don’t speak. And yet - they do. What happens next is even more unexpected. After assuring the crowds that the disturbance is not caused by day drinking, Peter preaches.

It’s an eloquent expression of the gospel that has an extraordinary impact on all who hear it. What makes this part so bananas is that up until this point in the scriptures, Peter is a mess. Peter constantly falters and fails in the gospels, to the point of denying he even knew Jesus on the night that Jesus was arrested. Peter’s abrupt transformation into an articulate, accurate, and effective communicator of the gospel is as miraculous as a bunch of backwoods Galilean fishermen suddenly becoming fluent in Arabic.

At the beginning of the first Day of Pentecost, 120 people were sitting around unsure what would happen next. By the end of the first Day of Pentecost, three thousand people believed the good news that God had become flesh in Jesus. Three thousand people believed that despite the fact that Jesus had been murdered by the state, God raised Jesus from the dead, proving once and for all that life is stronger than death, forgiveness is more powerful than sin, and love is more resilient than hate. Three thousand people were baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Church needs a robust and joyous celebration of Pentecost because the Church would not exist without the Holy Spirit.

I'll be honest. I worry sometimes that Christians have lost our grip on this reality. These days it is very easy to believe that it's all up to us. We think we're on our own. We may say we believe in God, but we live as functional atheists. We go about our days as little Atlas figures, trying to hold up our little corner of the world. We do this as individuals and we do this as communities. We don't really trust that God is at work in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our church, in our world.

It's not really our fault; the vast majority of the voices in our culture endorse a worldview that is materialistic, individualistic, and secular.

One of the few voices of reason are often in church basements. People in recovery have learned that they cannot afford to live at odds with reality. They have learned they must admit powerlessness. They have learned they have no choice but to surrender to a Higher Power. Sobriety is a lifelong journey that happens one day at a time, but it is also a miracle facilitated by the Holy Spirit.

I want to be perfectly clear: acknowledging the reality of God's active presence in the world does not mean becoming a pollyanna about the world. Rather, the spirit-empowered life requires total honesty about the brokenness that surrounds us.

Now, I'm going to share a Eugene Peterson quote. When my best friend read a draft she said, wow, that's a really long Eugene Peterson quote. The other thing you should probably know about your new co-pastor is that as far as I'm concerned, there's no such thing as an overlong Eugene Peterson quote.

He writes this:

"The sheer volume and quality of wreckage in the world and culture around us are appalling: wrecked bodies, wrecked marriages, wrecked careers, wrecked plans, wrecked families, wrecked alliances, wrecked friendships, wrecked prosperity. We avert our eyes. We try not to dwell on it. We wake up expecting health and love, justice and success. We try to keep our hopes up. And then some kind of crash puts us or someone we care about in a pile of wreckage. Newspapers document the ruins in photographs and headlines. Our own hearts and diaries fill in the details. Are any promises, any hopes, exempt from the general carnage? It doesn't seem so.

Why, then, is not every intelligent and awake person a cynic? Why does not the wise person despair? Is it sheer naivete that keeps people striving for the best, investing themselves in acts of compassion, giving themselves sacrificially to add to the available beauty, and suffering abuse to witness to the truth?

Why? Because of Pentecost. Because the Holy Spirit is among us and within us. Because God's Spirit continues to hover over the chaos of the world's evil and our sin

and shapes a new creation and new creatures. Pentecost means that God is not a spectator, in turn amused and alarmed at world history; rather, he is a participant. Pentecost means that the invisible is more important than the visible, at any single moment and at every single event that we choose to examine. Pentecost means that everything, especially everything that looks to us like wreckage, is material that God is using to make a praising life.”

Pentecost means that the invisible is more important than the visible. Maybe we don't see tongues of fire resting on one another's heads. We can't see the wind either, but that doesn't mean the breeze isn't blowing. This is what I believe the Spirit is empowering me to speak - and this is what I pray the Spirit is empowering you to hear. God is real, God is good, and God is always with you. Perhaps you recognize these words from the Benediction I've been repeating each week.

When I say that God is real, I don't mean as some vague, amorphous idea. I mean that God is as real as your pinky toe. When I say that God is good, I don't mean that God is nice. I believe that God desires the whole of creation to be restored - for wrongs to be made right, for the oppressed to be set free, for each and every beloved child of God to flourish.

When I say that God is always with you, I don't mean that God is a spiritual cheerleader, rooting for the home team to win. I mean that we live and move and have our being with the radical love that is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Even when we are mired in wreckage so dense we can't even pray, the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

The prayer of Pentecost is a prayer worth praying every day: Come, Holy Spirit. It was worth praying when I've been tricked into a game of preach, pray, or die. It's worth praying when you're locked in a crisis with a family member who just doesn't make sense to you anymore. It's worth praying when you have an impossible decision to make. It's worth praying when you read the news. It's worth praying every time we need to be reminded that God is real, and good, and with us.

We just need to know that if we really mean this when we pray this, we just might get more than we bargained for. May it be so.