



A Good Word ---- the Church

May 23, 2021

Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-8

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Today we celebrate the first Pentecost, in this week 1700 years ago when the Council of Nicaea agreed “we believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic Church.” Now actually, Pentecost had been celebrated for centuries. Jews celebrated Pentecost first as harvest festival for many generations. Then it evolved and became associated more with the Law / the Ten Commandments. A common thread seems to be celebrating God’s grace as the source of all life in community—harvest providing food, the Law providing ordered justice—which they receive gratefully and to which they respond generously, faithfully. In that vein, that lineage, earliest Christians marked the coming of the Spirit to enliven and shape their life together in the church. Hear what the Spirit may say. {Acts 2:5-21 }

It must have been stirring. Like oxygen in every breath taken, something in the deepest core of being sparked, kindled, awakened. The first Pentecost ... like feeling a rush of wind and tongues of fire, as Luke poetically expresses it. Energized by Sacred Grace, unseen as such, yet so evident in the people who responded. Enflamed by Holy Love – set fire to care for others amid fear, uncertainties, yearnings common to humanity. Empowered to live fully, each as created, amid beautiful diversity of identity. Impassioned to seek God’s way of grace and peace, each with unique ability, beyond a torpor of apathy about the world as it was. Emboldened to speak and to act, to imagine and envision possibilities – that is to

prophecy, to re-present the very Divine Power pouring out through them. It must have been stirring – the miracle of grace in that place, the first Pentecost.

Today, many say, we celebrate the birthday of the church. Happy Birthday to us! And even as we rejoice, others don't and won't. For them church (a bad word) has been irrelevant at best and harmful at worst. People who felt judged and found wanting, condemned as not good enough. Unaffirmed in who God created us to be or how God calls us to serve in this beautiful and hurting world. Abuses in the church are rightly appalling and roundly deplored. Books, movies and pop culture often portray church leaders and devout persons as silly jesters or more sinister. If that seems unfair, or at least, incomplete let's also avoid the other extreme of triumphalistic tones. To celebrate goodness and wonder we've known in the Church, we don't need to defensively denigrate other religions or denominations beyond Presbyterian. That's caused so much death – millions and millions during Medieval Holy Land Crusades or Protestant / Catholic wars in Europe or missionary colonization of Africa, South and North America, Asia. Truth is, like King David or Saul turned Paul in scripture, the church bears far from a perfectly unblemished history. We should repent sins committed, and lament wrongs compounded.

Still, today, I want to put in a good word for the church. Because despite faults and imperfections the church has nurtured so much goodness. We believe in the holy catholic and apostolic church I celebrate the wondrous miracle of what happened at the first Pentecost repeated over all the ages amid places and people around the world. It's astounding that what started so small in Jerusalem 2000 years ago has come all the way to us. The promise of grace, presence of Holy Love, power of resurrection life, simply passed one person to another. Words, actions, maybe books or other media in recent years. Holy Love touched and transformed— enflamed, empowered, impassioned, emboldened you and me. I wonder what people or experiences rise in our hearts to still inspire after so many years, to celebrate

today. Where, poetically, we felt the flames and the rush of the wind. All the ways we've received support, challenge, love, hope, faith, heard a good word in the church.

I cherish your memories of cradling me in the nursery, or patiently loving me when Sunday School was all about a red fire truck. Later in adult class, my mother's stern grace blew my high-school hair back. When someone (over there) spoke, I whispered: why doesn't she go somewhere they think like that. My mother turned to stare and whisper: all people are welcome here, and all people have a perspective to hear. I celebrate that care among other teachers / professors who honored questions and offered insights. Gifts of grace! Friends and colleagues ready to simply listen and love in times of hardship and need. Gifts of the Spirit settling intimately. Other leaders and ordinary people whose voices inspired passion around pursuit of what's right for a better world. I celebrate pilgrim places—people there and moments shared—Holy Land, Iona, Spain, Ghana. Who arises in our minds and hearts for us to celebrate today?

Central point in the Pentecost miracle is that each person heard a good word in lingo they knew. Beyond syllables spoken, it's human connection infused with something sacred. People speaking languages of Holy Love—in simple expressions of care, listening compassion, empowering affirmation ... all good news of Grace that brings hope, new life, resurrection. It's in sunny, bright moments and others when it seems the world turned to darkness—maybe literal blood, bodily harm or fiery words that blister even the most beloved relations or smoky anxieties, smoldering conflicts and fears about society or creation. In that Spirit, Paul shared a good word with the early church in Thessalonika. Our next reading begins his oldest letter, before all the gospels, our earliest piece of Christian scripture. Hear what the Spirit may say. {1 Thessalonians 1:1-8}

Friends, here are two quick points, in Paul's good word for us. First, Paul begins every letter with the greeting: "Grace and peace to you." We might say it's the gospel promise in shortest, simplest form. Everything else he writes explores further what that means. Grace—goodness, resources, abilities that give us what's needed to live abundantly. Peace—the fullness of security, joy, and meaning deeply personally and shared communally. Despite horrific human abuses and twisted manipulation of the gospel message that's what I believe Jesus embodied. That's what I believe God wants us to pass along in everything we say and do. Whenever we hire someone new or welcome new elected leaders, we always say we won't be perfect. We'll face disagreements, offenses, hard times. More than perfect bliss, I pray our life here is defined by grace. Where we truly try to care—with patient support, trust, respect. By the very way people received the message of grace and peace, Paul praises, they inspire others. A good word spread through the church.

Second point: Paul begins most letters by giving thanks. It's customary of the time—good manners, a literary pattern, a social convention. And in his time giving thanks was like sealing transactions already exchanged. I thank you for {whatever}. Done. No more obligation. End of expectations. Except here Paul makes a small grammatical and profound theological twist. He writes, I give thanks *to God* for whatever gifts we've shared. You see, human connections / transactions of grace never end. The giving-receiving-passing along reciprocal cycles of grace continue among us, because God the Divine Source of all Life and Love never stops giving. And so, as the church together, we become God's good word for the world. In all we do that's the purpose we share. That's our meetings, shared meals, serving, teaching, singing. Everywhere we go, that's the presence we bring. In our living faith the promise of grace kindles anew and the hope of resurrection blows through. And the miracle that began at Pentecost continued through ordinary people in places like Thessalonika and some of the oldest existing churches in mountains of Armenia,

through early church fathers and mothers living as hermits in the North African desert. Flowed all the way through Black Church in the grip and in the wake of slavery, flowed through Asian and Central American martyrs and Roman, Lutheran, Presbyterian splits ... to parents, teachers, neighbors, people in the pews next to us. “And now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever.” (Ephesians 3:20-21)

Friends, truth is, the church—like government and other human institutions—is just people like you and me doing our best, sometimes slipping into what’s worst, as we try to bring life in our world. Embodying grace, Jesus called people to join him in the way of love, into peace. He inspired ordinary people to Spirit-filled living faith. As they ate together he shared another good word: this is my body, this is the cup of the new covenant. And by the power of the Spirit, Holy Love kindled within each of those first followers and forged them into the church. Today as we share the bread and cup, give thanks to God and celebrate all the people, places, experiences, ways we’ve been touched, even moved to tears. Just maybe we’ll be stirred anew—enflamed, empowered, impassioned, emboldened. Let’s put in a good word for the church, a good word in the church and through the church, a good word as the church. Grace and peace, dear friends. Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.