

“A Sermon for Pentecost” by Elizabeth Gelfeld

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Pentecost

Before I came to Seekers Church, during the years our children were growing up, our family belonged to the Interfaith Families Project, IFFP, a congregation of about 100 families, mostly with children and mostly with one Jewish and one Christian parent. In IFFP, we were intentionally raising our children with both religions. So, when holidays came around it was double the fun. In December we would have workshops with titles like “Don’t Light the Menorah Too Close to the Christmas Tree.” At Passover each year we had a community Seder. On Easter Sunday, families would go to their various churches until IFFP began holding its own Easter Sunday service after one of our Jewish members insisted on it.

So we have those two pairs of holidays that are sort of related – Christmas and Hanukkah, Passover and Easter – but Pentecost is a holiday that Jews and Christians actually share. The only problem is, very few of us, Jews or Christians, know that. At IFFP I asked some of our learned Jewish members, such as my husband, Bobby, “What did you learn as a child about Shavuot, and how did you celebrate it?” They all gave me essentially the same answer – a blank stare, or they would say, “Well, nothing,” or “What is Shavuot, anyway?” More recently, I asked our own Deborah Sokolov, who grew up in a religious Jewish family, and she said, “I don’t remember that we did much of anything. Shavuot was the great, uncelebrated holiday.”

For the Christian experience of Pentecost, I consulted two of

our resident cradle Catholics here at Seekers, and asked them what they learned about Pentecost as they were growing up in Catholic churches. Linda Nunes-Schrag had it down pretty clearly – she understood as a child that this day was about the Holy Spirit, also known as the Holy Ghost, and she learned the story of the Apostles receiving the Holy Spirit. But, remember, she grew up in India and Tanzania. Growing up here in the States, Chris Madison had impressions of Pentecost that were similar to those of my Catholic friends in IFFP. Their experience was rather vague. Chris remembered there was something about tongues, and my friend Antoinette remembered a sense that Pentecost was something you didn't want to get too close to. After all, it was associated with Pentecostals, those overly enthusiastic ones who spoke in tongues and sometimes fell to the floor during worship.

I had always assumed that the early Christians invented Pentecost, until I heard a sermon on its connection to Shavuot. I was amazed. But there it was, right in the Book of Acts, the passage we heard today: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." They were gathered for something that already existed – Shavuot.

The Hebrew word Shavuot means simply "weeks," and it refers to the seven weeks following Passover. Seven weeks – 49 days – plus one, equals 50 days – Pentecost, in Greek. Pent means five – think: pentagon. This year, because of an unusual intersection of the calendars, Shavuot and Pentecost fall on the same day – today. Shavuot actually began yesterday at sundown, and, in one of its customs, many religious Jews spent the entire night studying the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

Shavuot, the feast of Weeks – was originally a harvest festival. The Weeks were counted from the beginning of the barley harvest in Israel until, seven weeks later, an offering was made of the new wheat harvest. In ancient times Shavuot was one of the three annual pilgrimage festivals, for which

many Jews would travel to Jerusalem – the other two being Passover in the spring and Sukkot in the fall. Some centuries later, the rabbis calculated that it was around this time of year that the Israelites reached Mount Sinai after leaving Egypt, and so the rabbis made the Sinai story the focus of Shavuot. That story is about the giving of God's Law to the people through Moses, which is why Jews celebrate it by studying all night.

The song we heard as we gathered this morning was composed and sung by a local rabbi, David Schneyer, and the translation of its Hebrew text is: "The Torah is a Tree of Life for those who hold her close, a Tree of Life for peace."

Now let's look at the story of Pentecost. Jesus was crucified. He died. But then, somehow, he still was with the people who loved him. His disciples, women and men, saw him, heard him speak, touched him, ate with him. In the Gospel stories, the appearances of the resurrected Christ come to an end with Jesus' ascension into heaven. That happened on a Thursday. The following Sunday, the disciples were gathered in a house in Jerusalem for the festival of Shavuot – Pentecost in Greek. And, as we heard in the reading from Acts, there was a great wind and the Holy Spirit came down upon them in the form of tongues of fire that appeared over each of their heads.

No one knows exactly what happened on Mount Sinai. Some imagine that God dictated the whole Torah – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – word by word. Others believe that the Ten Commandments were carved in stone by the finger of God. The Torah itself contains conflicting accounts, just as, several thousand years later, we get conflicting accounts in the Gospels about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

What Jews have always agreed on is that something enormously important happened in the Sinai experience – the Holy One revealed the Holy Presence to the people of Israel in a way

that forever changed them. God did not just bring them out of Egypt and leave them to wander in the desert.

And, what the first-century Christian writers were saying in the story of Pentecost was that the man Jesus, whose teaching and healing and presence revealed the Law of God in a radically new light, was himself a new revelation of the Holy One.

God speaks. God's Spirit comes to us. Jews and Christians alike have always seen the ordinary elements of life as metaphors of the sacred. Earth, water, wind, fire.

Thomas Cahill, in his book *The Gifts of the Jews*, says that the ancient Hebrew people had no concept of the material world and the spiritual as separate categories. That was a Greek idea still centuries in the future. The Hebrews knew that God was spirit – invisible, and not to be represented in art – so how could they imagine God? The closest they could come to imagining spirit was ruach – the Hebrew word for wind, and breath – invisible, yet real – because you could see its effects.

Let's all take a deep breath.

The effects of the spirit of God on a person were described by the prophet Isaiah in his vision of the branch that would come from the family of Jesse, King David's father. Isaiah, Chapter 11, Verses 1-3:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and strength,

the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

These seven effects of the Spirit – gifts, really – can rest on us, too, can enter us like the air we breathe. They are not like the special spiritual gifts that Paul wrote about, which are different gifts given to individuals for the building up of the whole body of Christ. These seven are gifts that everyone may have.

I wonder, of these seven gifts, is there one that is most important to you right now, one in particular that you would like to feel blowing through you like wind? Any of us might choose wisdom – who doesn't feel the need for more of that? But, some of you might be facing a serious illness – your own or that of a loved one – and want courage more than anything else. Or, you may be facing a hard decision and need right judgment. Those of us who tend to take our gifts for granted would benefit from a fresh breath of wonder.

I'm going to read the names of these gifts again, one by one, and, as I say the name of the one you want, please stand or just raise your hand to receive a symbolic flame.

The gift of WISDOM

The gift of UNDERSTANDING

The gift of RIGHT JUDGMENT

The gift of COURAGE

The gift of KNOWLEDGE

The gift of REVERENCE

The gift of WONDER

Let us now share a litany of the gifts. After each phrase I read, please respond together, with "Let us renew the face of

the earth.”

Leader: With the gift of wisdom, which helps us to see clearly,

All: Let us renew the face of the earth.

Leader: With the gift of understanding, which opens our minds and hearts,

All: Let us renew the face of the earth.

Leader: With the gift of right judgment, which keeps us on a true path,

All: Let us renew the face of the earth.

Leader: With the gift of courage, the strength to go forward, through and beyond our fears,

All: Let us renew the face of the earth.

Leader: With the gift of knowledge, the assurance of things beyond our senses,

All: Let us renew the face of the earth.

Leader: With the gift of reverence, which inspires us to care for all of creation,

All: Let us renew the face of the earth.

Leader: With the gift of wonder, which allows us to experience the world as children do,

All: Let us renew the face of the earth.

The Holy One was revealed to Moses in the bush that burned without being consumed. Take these symbolic flames, and remember the Holy Spirit ever present within you, upon you, and all around you. Amen.