

“Appreciating Pentecost” by Pat Conover

June 16, 2013

The 4th Sunday after Pentecost

I follow Luke in regarding Pentecost, not Easter, as the climax of the story of the Good News of Jesus our Savior. It is easy to forget that Luke also wrote Acts and built an explicit transition between the two volumes of one story. Here is Luke's story of the last words of Jesus to his disciples in his gospel.

Be prepared: I am sending what my Father promised down on you. Stay here in the city until you are invested with power from on high.” (Luke 24: 44-49, Scholars Translation)

In contrast to the endings in Matthew and Mark, which have the disciples directed to go to Galilee, Luke tells us the disciples stayed on in Jerusalem, dangerous Jerusalem. Peter is presented as the charismatic leader of the Jerusalem gathering and this story is confirmed by Paul who goes to Jerusalem to meet with Peter, James the brother of Jesus, and other disciples.

After the crucifixion of Jesus the close followers of Jesus recognized the importance of their memories of Jesus and came to understand that the same Spirit that inspired Jesus inspired them as well. The empowerment of this discovery became central to their lives during the Pentecost experience. They responded by forming the first Christian community before they even had that name, began the millenia long Christian

Way. Generation after generation of Christians have discovered the significance of the guidance of Jesus and the confirmation of experiencing the Presence of God.

It took courage to claim Jesus as Savior and form the first Christian community in Jerusalem shortly after the Temple leaders and Roman authorities had exercised their power to crucify Jesus. It takes recognition and courage today to move from becoming a cheer leader for Jesus to open ourselves more completely to the power of the Divine Presence which can shake up our life plans.

The Pentecost Church was about the size of Seekers but had far less resources: less money, no synagogue, no written gospels, no letters of Paul, no cultural prestige. Fortunately, they had what they needed most and we cannot be saved without it. Trusting in our own resources, constructions, budgets, agreements, traditions, building, reputation, connections, and more, matters. Taken all together it is not what matters most.

If we protect ourselves from the dangers of excitement, we protect ourselves from what our Christian community needs most of all, from what the world needs most of all.

In our lectionary passage from Luke, Jesus welcomes a prostitute into the Christian Way, forgiving her sin and saying "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." Paul echoes the sentiment in the lectionary passage in Galatians when he writes that we are not justified by the law but rather by following our Savior who we name as Christ. Forgiveness, faith, and following Jesus were landmarks for the Pentecost Church and then for the spreading church in the Jewish and Christian diaspora. If we continue to claim the meaningfulness of walking the Christian Way, following the guidance of Jesus, and open ourselves to the excitement that comes with acknowledging the Presence of God in our lives, I trust Seekers will find the courage for ongoing transformation.

It was the excitement and commitment of the close followers of Jesus that changed everything and it led them to see things in Hebrew Scripture that helped them understand their experience of Jesus, their experience with each other after Pentecost. Hebrew Scripture was inspired by the Holy Spirit and it is inspiration that matters more than details of law and story. Hebrew Scripture cannot be captured by Jewish tradition and the Bible cannot be captured by Christian tradition.

We can look for inspiration in the long history of Christianity, of the Church of the Saviour, of our own thirty-seven years of traditions, and continue our transformation as a community. We can keep on facing into the challenges of personal growth and transformation, doing the work that comes with claiming our callings, and practice stewardship of our whole lives as we grow in community, and participate in our personal and shared outward journeys. When we recognize that the Divine Presence led to the changes that started Christianity, to the many changes in recorded Christian history, to changes in the Church of the Saviour, to the changes that Seekers has made in becoming a distinctive expression of the inspiration of the traditions of the Church of the Saviour, we can become less defensive about the forms of our traditions and draw on the inspiration of shared living memories as we embrace our current challenges.

I invite each of you to read the last chapter of Luke and the first two chapters of Acts and work with the story on your own. Here is my closer telling of the story. .

Pentecost was the date of the Jewish Feast of Weeks which celebrated the barley harvest and was traditionally the date on which Moses gave the law to the Israelites during the Exodus. It was an occasion for Jews to gather in Jerusalem as the Disneyland of Jewish religion and culture, Jerusalem with the biggest single building in the world at that time, Jerusalem paid for with both Roman and Jewish taxes, Jerusalem built by tens of thousand of Jewish workers, Jerusalem held

together by a shaky truce grounded in centuries of rebellion, war, and negotiation.

Luke sets the story in the context of expectation that the Last Days were coming soon though only God know the timing. Luke guides us to forget about the timing of the Last Days and follow the guidance of Jesus to embrace the coming gift of the Holy Spirit. Luke additionally sets the scene with Jesus saying that while John baptized with water, the Holy Spirit baptizes with fire.

After the crucifixion the close followers of Jesus returned to where they were staying in an upper room in Jerusalem. Then Peter speaks to a crowd of about one hundred and twenty followers of Jesus and explains that the crucifixion had to happen to fulfill the promises of Hebrew Scripture.

Then Matthias was chosen by lot to become the twelfth disciple to replace Judas. Then the close followers, including the disciples, complete at twelve once again, gathered in a house on Pentecost.

A powerful event occurred. Luke describes the experience of the event as hearing a powerful wind and seeing flames of fire on the heads of the participants, which fit the themes of power and fire.

There was excited talking. A crowd of Jews from many nations gathered around the house. Some were surprised that they somehow could hear what was being said in their own language. This was a less magical experience than we might imagine from our distance of two thousand years. Paul describes speaking in ecstatic "tongues" and points out that some have the gift of understanding such ecstatic speech. Some in the Jewish crowd clearly didn't understand the ecstatic speech and accused the disciples of being drunk. Peter defends the disciples against the charge of drunkenness by referencing a passage in the prophetic book of Joel, as follows.

God declares, "In the last days I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy. Your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams. I will even pour my Spirit on slaves, both men and women. In those days I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophecy. ...Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Peter continues and explains to the crowd that Jesus is both Lord and Messiah. Then Peter issues an altar call:

Repent, and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven. Then you will receive the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and for your children, for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls. ...Save yourselves from this corrupt generation. (based on NSRV)

Luke reports that about three thousand were baptized.

There is a lot of biblical detail here that begs for further explanation. I'll settle for pointing out that Luke was writing in Greek for a predominantly Greek or Hellenized Jewish audience looking back toward Jesus from a distance of about fifty years. Luke goes on in Acts to give a lot of attention to Paul but is nonetheless clear that Christianity begins with Peter and the other close followers of Jesus gathered in Jerusalem. Furthermore, with the phrase "and those far away," Luke is making it clear that the Jewish disciples, and Peter in particular, are important for understanding the spread of Christianity.

Luke and Paul were both Hellenized Jews. They both valued Hebrew Scripture and Gentile converts. Luke, however, gives great attention to the reality and importance of Jesus as a living person and not just as the Risen Christ.

The wildness and power of the Pentecost story is important and I am troubled by my perception that main-line and fundamentalist Protestants, as well as Roman Catholics, seem to act like fire fighters while the close followers of Jesus were having a hair-on-fire spiritual experience.

The Roman Catholic tradition seems fairly straightforward to me. Looking back from centuries of argumentation, division, and conflicts over doctrine backed up by military force, the Roman Catholic interest is to claim Peter as the founder of Roman Catholicism, the only true Christianity, and assert that the spiritual authority given to Peter has been passed down to current Popes a line of spiritual authority that parallels the blood line succession of Kings. That puts the wildness safely in a box. When wildness breaks out call it heresy and kill it off.

Protestantism has been equally suspicious of Pentecost, equally eager to defend doctrine and institutions against wildness, just different doctrines and different institutions. I was baptized as a Presbyterian and I clearly remember being sharply warned about "Holy Roller" Pentecostals. So I made it my business to go to a pentecostal church to see what was going on. It didn't particularly attract me but it didn't repulse me either. I remember some nice people welcoming me, never pressuring me, and I was glad to share their worship service. It didn't seem very wild to me and there was no rolling around on the floor.

In seminary I took the required church history courses and learned almost nothing about Pentecostalism. I've learned a little more since and suggest that pentecostalism is as broad and diverse a Christian tradition as protestantism and catholicism. In caricature terms I'm aiming at moving beyond Protestant avoidance, Pentecostal idolatry, and Roman Catholic institutionalization of Pentecost.

One key for me to understanding the Pentecost story is the

recognition that thinking and feelings are two aspects of one integrated whole-brain and whole-body processes. We pay attention, consider, and remember what we care about. We can focus on thinking or feeling, but our focusing on one aspect or the other doesn't change the reality that our experiences include both thinking and feeling rather than one or the other. Understanding Pentecost concerns thinking. Appreciating Pentecost concerns feelings. We cannot fully understand Pentecost without appreciating it. We cannot fully appreciate Pentecost without understanding it.

For me, and perhaps for you, the feelings and appreciation is the harder part. It's a hair-on-fire feeling and I'm a person who generally likes a no drama life. My habit is to hold the Pentecost story at arm's length, analyze it, categorize it, and then tuck it safely away until needed. I prefer to focus on and value the general gifts of the Spirit such as prayer, teaching, and administration rather than the special gifts of speaking in tongues and charismatic healing. I embrace the special gifts as well, but that is another sermon or ten.

Pentecost points to a mutually shared excitement, not a merely personal engagement. It is hard to make a single log burn well. When you put two or more logs together the reflected heat of two faces of flame supports fire until one or the other log burns out. When I sense you are feeling what I'm feeling, I am encouraged to let more of my feelings show.

We talk about Seekers as a Christian community because we get to know each other as whole persons and not merely as church members. We can offer gifts to Seekers but what matters most is investing ourselves in Seekers, getting our weight down in Seekers. We cross the semi-permeable membrane into deeper belonging when we move from merely approving of Seekers to letting Seekers matter, even matter a lot.

When we do care,

when we give enough time, energy, and money to feel invested in the shared purposes of Seekers,

when we are willing to adjust our priorities,

when we grieve with those who have lost a loved one,

when we let go in Interplay,

when we take time to look at some of our beautiful art as more than decoration;

when we offer and accept forgiveness;

being on the inside gets easier, opening our closets gets easier, hanging in rather than avoiding conflict get easier.

Doing better with each other starts with loving each other, loving each other even when we don't like each other all that much. I'm talking about the transitions from generosity to solidarity, from helping to working together, from friendliness to friendship.

Fire isn't the only metaphor for telling about experiencing the Divine Presence. Entering "The Silence" in Silent Retreats can also be a door into a shared room where we are each easing down our focused thinking and explore across boundaries. Shared silence encourages us to work with favored or forgotten feelings, to notice things about ourselves and our relationships that we have been overlooking. Sometimes I let the stillness of Merton's Pond touch me as much as the fire of a Deanna Bogert boogie.

Conversation is great for crossing conceptual boundaries. Sharing feelings is great for crossing subjective boundaries into the territories of hope, trust, and mutual appreciation. When we risk caring more for each other, we are empowered for exploring sensitive topics, claiming our callings, recognizing each other's callings. Expressions of shared caring empower us to burn brightly, to do the loving things, the expressive

things, the caring things, that lead us into shared salvation.

The close followers of Jesus were transformed by recognizing what mattered most to them:

their own empowerment,

their deep sense of shared community,

their recognition of what mattered in the stories and memories they carried,

their inspiration that shaped their lives and ministries.

Even when our words and concepts can't keep up with our recognition of what matters and what matters most, we can continue to follow our caring and hope into exploring, engaging, embodying, and expressing the love of God which has infected and is healing our lives. This is where the power comes from for inner transformation, for loving community, for meaning-filled ministry.

It was the charismatic experience of Peter and the early close followers that drew in Jewish converts, not mere textual discussion. Converts wanted what the close followers had, and all they had was each other, their memories, their stories, and their inspiration. All they could do with their spiritual treasure was give it away as fast as they could. That was enough, more than enough, for the transformations that have called us down the centuries to gather in our upper room today.

Like the first followers of Jesus, we have each other and we have the guidance of Jesus that we can also experience the confirmation and excitement of the Divine Presence. It's one thing to look out a window at the rain and another to walk out and get wet. Putting on rain coats and carrying umbrellas is smart, but sometimes I leave them in the closet so that I can more fully experience the rain.