

# Peter Bankson: Pentecost: Incendiary Grace

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

*In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour*

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## Pentecost: Incendiary Grace

If we were in the habit of throwing a birthday party for the Christian Church, today would be the day. Imagine a cake with almost 2,000 candles – bright, leaping tongues of fire that not even the biggest blowhard among us could extinguish with one breath. It was a time of incendiary grace, a time when the disciples caught fire, and let the Holy Spirit burn brightly in them.

Pentecost signals the presence of the Holy Spirit in ways that are disturbing, to say the least. Listen to the description of that first Pentecost day:

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues of fire, distributed, and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.*

On that early Pentecost day, the followers of Jesus were gathered to celebrate one of the three ancient festivals of Israelite tradition – the feast of the first fruits – the celebration of the new harvest. Pentecost is a thanks giving

for an old cycle that has produced new fruit, both nourishment and reproduction. As an exile people, we Seekers seem to be invigorated by the opportunities for fresh fruits from old trees. Our impending move from this place can ignite new vision in us. Yesterday Marjory and I drove past the a property in NE, where Paul Weiss is calling forth a "Children's Choir and Coffeehouse" that will be the center of a new "Capitol Village." I thought about Seekers sharing that space with youth choirs and a vibrant program for the children from the neighborhood, and felt the heat rise within me.

For the Jews, Pentecost was also a celebration of the anniversary of the giving of the law to Moses, a time to celebrate God's presence with the children of Israel and God's guidance to them – a special form of God's gifts to the people to help assure their continued life and growth. In our current tradition, we pay close attention to discerning God's call, and sharing God's gifts to us within our families and the faith community, as well as in our vocations and ministries to the wider world. [Marjory's new book](#) offers a process for discerning God's call and finding structures to share God's gifts to us. Consider it a handbook for Pentecost people.

What those celebrants did not expect two millennia ago was tongues of fire, and the followers of Christ suddenly speaking in the languages of everyone who was there. It was a diverse crowd in Jerusalem that day:

*Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem devout Jews from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because they heard them speaking each in their own language. And they were amazed and wondered, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in our own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and*

*proselytes, Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others, mocking, said, "They are filled with new wine."*

*But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them, "People of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:*

*And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and the young shall see visions, and the old shall dream dreams; and in those days I will pour out my Spirit on my servants, both men and women; and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth beneath, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned into night and the moon into blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and manifest day. And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

On that Pentecost day when the Holy Spirit came among the people of God, it produced three effects that stand as challenges to us as we reflect on our own lives as followers of Christ:

- They stood out from the crowd. Do we?
- They were radically inclusive. Are we?
- They counted on being different from each other. Do we?

**They stand out from the crowd.** When the Spirit came upon them, the disciples stood out from the crowd; they were different from the other residents of Jerusalem; some, mocking, even said they were drunk.

There they were, Jesus' friends with tongues of fire distributed among them, speaking in languages they had no reason to know, and telling this huge crowd of diverse strangers the good news of the mighty works of God – telling stories that could be understood by some, but sounded like gibberish to others. They were on fire. They were Pentecost people.

On Monday and Tuesday I was in Charleston, SC at a meeting of the [Communities In Schools](#) State Directors. There were about 25 of us there, gathered for 2 days to talk about issues and opportunities we face as the CIS Network continues to grow.

Mid-day Monday about half of us visited a CIS site on James Island, on the north side of Charleston. The Septima B. Clark Corporate Academy has been an alternative school site within the Charleston school district for almost 10 years. The school is located on the edge of town, where large lots with manufactured homes mingle with tiny farms.

There are about 160 students in the school. They are a diverse lot, drawn from all over the city. The headmaster, who has been there as a teacher for the entire life of the school, explained that students must apply and be selected to attend. The main criteria are:

- high risk of failure in regular school;
- demonstrated willingness to learn, given the chance; and
- no violence.

These are all kids who would not have made it downtown. As I walked through the halls, I thought: "Children from all over the city – Anglos and African-Americans, Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of gated communities and public housing. Septima B. Clark Corporate Academy is as diverse as Jerusalem was on Pentecost."

We stopped in an English class. The kids were a wonder to behold. A dozen attitudes; fat pants and miniskirts;

dreadlocks and '50's "big hair; bravado and slow, shy smiles.

Cheri is sitting on a table in the back of the room. She's small and trim with a big flowered scarf, short blonde hair and husky voice, and what I can only describe as a wily grin. Cheri's got attitude. She's the teacher.

She asks one of the kids to describe what they've been learning. Here's the report. They just started working on Romeo and Juliet. Before that they created an illustrated story of the death of a hardwood forest: harvested for cash; converted to chips, then paper; used once then discarded; hauled to a dump on a lot that used to be the forest. It was illustrated on paper plates, clipped to the window blind – a stark ecology lesson that they were eager to share with a stranger.

"Before writing the story," one of the kids said, "we learned to write Haiku." "You know." he said. "A Haiku is a 17 syllable poem that scans 5 – 7- 5." I'd forgotten.

There they were, the class Haiku, taped to the wall above the window displaying the paper plates – half a dozen Haiku. The one I remember goes like this:

*It's almost Friday.*

*The week is nearly over.*

*Hooray! I can't wait.*

Cheri smiles her wily smile as her kids tell us what they're learning – and why they're learning so well. Why? Because Cheri and the other teachers and the volunteers all care about them as real, complicated, growing individuals. They stand out from the crowd, in school and back home, and that's OK.

As I see it, Cheri is a Pentecost person. She's learned how to speak Haiku, and ecology, and Romeo and Juliet so a dozen troubled kids can learn that they are loved and listened to –

and that they are not alone.

What about us? Are we different enough from the culture we live in to be recognized as a people – as God's people? Do others look at the choices we make in this global culture of great wealth and consumption competing with great poverty and need, and say that we are crazy for the choices we make, crazy or drunk with new wine?

Pentecost calls us to liberation from the stranglehold of our culture, so we can burn with love and servanthood. Pentecost calls us to stand out from the crowd. We are called to be Pentecost people.

The second thing that marks Pentecost people is that **they are radically inclusive**. From the story in Acts, everyone in Jerusalem came to the house where the mighty wind was blowing. As impossible as it seems, it sounds like everyone who came could make sense out of something that was being said by one or another of the Jesus people.

Today, a happening like that first Pentecost would be too big for one place – bigger than the simultaneous opening of Star Wars: The Phantom Menace – bigger and much more diverse. A sweepstakes drawing with everyone imaginable there – Baptist gospel choirs, new arrivals from Bosnia and Ghana and Kosovo, and government lawyers, and drug dealers and homeless women and children, and sales clerks – and us, too.

In our call to be church, and in our life together, we commit ourselves to this kind of deep inclusivity. We want to hear the Good News from different perspectives. We want to be welcoming to all who are attracted by the sound of the Spirit – young and old, women and men, regardless of race or economic condition, or sexual orientation. Sometimes we do better than others. And some people we **think** would be welcome here don't come. And there are times when the criticism of what is happening stings enough to make me wonder if we really are

drunk with new wine. Pentecost reminds us of our call to be radically inclusive.

The third mark of Pentecost on Jesus' friends was that **they counted on being different from each other**. On that day, they spoke differently from each other, and others – strangers – suddenly understood. My guess is that they were as surprised as some of their critics, and probably just as confused. Suddenly, Matthew is talking, and Andrew can't understand a word he's saying! But they went ahead anyway, because they had been expecting something unexpected from God.

Later, we hear from Paul in his letter to the church at Corinth how this lesson of differing gifts grows into an understanding of the central importance of honoring and being empowered by our differences. In our Epistle lesson for this week, Paul writes:

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

Paul goes on to give us a few examples from his time – the utterance of wisdom – or knowledge – faith – healing – the working of miracles – prophecy – the ability to distinguish among spirits – tongues, and their interpretation. Some of these gifts seem more understandable than others today, but I believe God is still inspiring these gifts and more in people in our time.

Take preaching. We call ourselves Seekers Church because of an understanding about modern prophecy: The name comes from an essay on Servant Leadership by John Greenleaf. Here's the part that talks about our kind of "Seekers:"

*The variable that marks some periods as barren and some as*

*rich in prophetic vision is in the interest, the level of seeking, and the responsiveness of the hearers. The variable is not in the presence or absence or the relative quality and force of the prophetic voices. Prophets grow in stature as people respond to their message. If their early attempts are ignored or spurned, their talent may wither away.*

*It is seekers, then, who make prophets, and the initiative of any one of us in searching for and responding to the voice of contemporary prophets may mark the turning point in their growth and service.*

I've come to think that it might be more descriptive to see ourselves as the "Preachers' Church." Here we expect any Seeker to step forward and do what I am doing today – to offer an understanding, from a personal perspective, of the Scripture lessons of the week.

In the past 12 weeks we've had 9 different individuals and 1 group bring the Word. Some taught, some told stories, but all were heard by some of us. How different we are from each other – and how rich that makes our celebration as a community. We count on being different from each other, even when it's not comfortable.

In addition to preaching for each other, as Seekers we believe in Christian servanthood. According to our call as a church, that means we are committed to empowering others within the normal structures of our daily lives (work, family and other primary relationships, and citizenship) as well as through special structures for service and witness. This empowering works when we can honor our differences, confirm God's unique gifts, and live together into the unknown future to which God is calling us.

Pentecost reminds us that the church is **us**. It was the sound of the wind that brought the multitudes together, but it was the testimony of the followers of Christ that set them on

fire. Each of us is called to discern, clarify and employ God's unique gift to us for the common good. We can help each other become Pentecost people – burning brightly with the Holy Spirit

Pentecost is a time of incendiary grace. It calls us to stand out from the crowd, even if others think we're crazy – or drunk. Pentecost calls us to radical inclusion – to reach out in compassion to those who are different from us. And, Pentecost calls us to count on our differences – to love, honor and obey them, and the power they bring to tell the Good News in ways that everyone can understand, even the strangers who find us on the World Wide Web.

It won't be easy. If Pentecost is not a disturbing time, we've lost sight of the radical message for which it stands – our God is a God of change. May the Holy Spirit burn a hole in your heart!

Amen.