

Are You Pentecostal? Pentecost Sunday

Last Fall I attended a local meeting of ministers and met Mike Jackson for the first time – pastor of New Life Assembly of God. I mentioned that the Episcopal Church also had its Pentecostals from the early seventies when the Charismatic Movement swept the churches landscape. In that way I said that our two churches shared a common thread. He replied that the “Pentecostals were as far from the Episcopal Church as you could be.”

On the west coast while speaking at a seminary, Professor Fred Craddock took a student’s question before the first lecture. The student stood up and said, "Before you speak, I need to know if you are Pentecostal." The room grew silent. Craddock said he looked around for the Dean of the seminary! He was no where to be found. The student continued with his quiz right in front of everybody. Craddock was taken aback, and so he said, "Do you mean do I belong to the Pentecostal Church?" He said, "No, I mean are you Pentecostal?" Craddock said, "Are you asking me if I am charismatic?" the student said, "I am asking you if you are Pentecostal." Craddock said, "Do you want to know if I speak in tongues?" He said, "I want to know if you are Pentecostal." Craddock said, "I don't know what your question is." The student said, "Obviously, you are not Pentecostal." He left.

As we celebrate the birth of the Church of Jesus Christ this morning that question is very appropriate. Are you Pentecostal?

If the church is alive in the world it is Pentecostal. And you thought we were Episcopalian! Yes, we can proudly say we are Pentecostal as well as anyone else!

How do we keep this aliveness, this fire burning, this spirit moving? What must exist in us, around us, and through us, if we are to be Pentecostal? These three elements are given in this passage of Acts:

1. We Are To Be All Together

Some years ago Charles Sheldon wrote a book titled, In His Steps. In that book he told about the revolution which occurred in the lives of a church and a congregation when the people decided to put every moral issue to the test of one question—“What would Jesus do?”. Perhaps his book was a bit naive. We are not always sure of what

Jesus would do in every situation. Many of the moral issues which we must face as we begin the 21st century were never part of His First-century world.

Perhaps a better form of the question is: “Given what I know of the mind and spirit of Jesus Christ, what would Christ have me do?” A violent wind would follow if we were to ever really take that question seriously.

The measure of a church’s unity might also be expressed when the people just feel it. They see it on each other’s faces, they sense it in the air, and in short they just know it.

“I know it when I see it.”

That’s what Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said back in 1964. He was trying to get a handle on one of the trickiest issues faced by the court over the last half century — the definition of obscenity. About the best he could do, in an attempt to nail down a very slippery concept, was to say, “I know it when I see it.”

2. We Are To Be Filled With the Holy Spirit

How do you know when someone possesses the Holy Spirit? The same comment from Judge Stewart applies. When it’s there people see it’s results. The scripture tells us that “all of them were filled” and “they began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.”

All Christians are filled with the Spirit at the time of their rebirth at baptism. “The wind blows where it chooses,” Jesus said, “and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3:8). He goes on to say, “So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” From the time of baptism forward the church is to assist in helping the Christian discover, develop and deploy that gift or gifts as the Spirit gives ability.

In the last century the Episcopal Church began to look intensely at the work of the Spirit with movements that swept many churches. Charismatic prayer groups formed in the late sixties and early seventies and about the same time began the Cursillo movement from Spain that spread through many churches exploring how the Christian faith might be lived as a “little course” and a lifelong journey that shares God’s joy with others in small groups. Along came Alpha helping us to look again at the basics of the Christian faith and how

we might reach out to neighbors, friends and family seeking to deepen our relationship with Christ together and be sent out with power to invite others to “Come see Jesus, Come know Jesus.” New Beginnings may now help us return to those great movements of the Spirit if we come together and we allow the Spirit to give us abilities beyond our own strength.

The early church also wanted to know if the Spirit was with them. St. Ignatius of Antioch made that famous statement, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is the Church and where the Church is gathered there is the Spirit.”

It appears from our lessons that the Spirit is a quality that eludes us. The wind – it is way the scripture describes the work of the Holy Spirit. It’s an invisible but truly powerful force. We know it when we feel it. And when the Spirit comes to us in a gale force hurricane how can we resist?

The Holy Spirit warms us and melts our cold, cold hearts: Once upon a time there was a piece of iron, which was very strong and very hard. Many attempts had been made to break it, but all had failed.

“I’ll master it,” said the axe... and his blows fell heavily upon the piece of iron, but every blow only made the axe’s edge more blunt, until it finally ceased to strike and gave up in frustration.

“Leave it to me,” said the saw... and it worked back and forth on the iron’s surface until its jagged teeth were all worn and broken. Then in despair, the saw quit trying and fell to the side.

“Ah!” said the hammer, “I knew you two wouldn’t succeed. I’ll show you how to do this!” But at the first fierce blow, off flew its head and the piece of iron remained just as before, proud and hard and unchanged.

“Shall I try?” asked the small soft flame. “Forget it,” everyone else said. “What can you do? You’re too small and you have no strength.” But the small soft flame curled around the piece of iron, embraced it... and never left it until it melted under its warm irresistible influence.

Perhaps this parable means that God’s way is not the way of force but love. God’s way is not to break hearts but to melt them. Perhaps it means that that is our calling – to melt hearts... under the irresistible warmth of God’s gracious love.

3. We Are To Join Together Constantly in Prayer

In last weeks first lesson the last verse (Acts 1:14) says, “All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer....”

Throughout scripture prayer releases the power of the Spirit. It released power in and through Jesus when people touched him in simple faith through prayer. And our duty as Christians is devoting ourselves in prayer. As we wait in prayer again for the moving of the Holy Spirit in this church and in our lives, we seek how God might move from our lips to our legs.

Trinity Church is a praying church. Who we are is what we pray. We pray the ancient common prayers of the Prayer Book. We from the heart pray one for another. We pray for our healing, we pray in thanksgiving and celebration of our common life together, we pray for our neighbors and friends and for the stranger. And we pray that a tornado the size of Pentecost may sweep our hearts and set us on fire! Are we Pentecostal? If the Spirit is in our hearts, and in our mouths and in our feet then others will know it. And then you can tell those folks on Wright Road, you ain't seen nothin' yet! AMEN