

The Practice of Pentecost

Ephesians 4:1-3; Galatians 5: 22-23; 2 Timothy 1:6-7

We celebrate Pentecost today, that day the Spirit descended upon the believers in a room in Jerusalem and the church was born. For some churches Pentecost is a major celebration. When I was growing up in the church there were two days of celebration, Christmas and Easter. The third biggest was Mother's Day! Some Baptist churches have added Lent and Advent. For Eastern Orthodox Christians, Transfiguration Sunday is a major feast day, when Jesus was transfigured into glory on the mountain. They have more feast days than I can count, but Transfiguration is big because partaking in the divine nature is central to their theology. If Grace Baptist picked one event, one day in the life of Jesus to celebrate, what might it be?

On this Pentecost as we celebrate the giving of the Holy Spirit, I want us to think about "Practicing Pentecost." Pentecost can be a spiritual practice.

I

For the last few decades, people have been talking about what they call "The Practicing Church." By that they mean churches that emphasize helping their

members develop a life of spiritual practices like prayer, worship, contemplation and study.

In her helpful book of essays entitled *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorothy Bass describes what spiritual practices are:

Practices are those shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life.

These are the daily, weekly ways where over the years we open ourselves to the presence of the Spirit. There are no instant saints; there is no microwave spirituality.

So today I will explore with you those gifts and fruits of the Spirit that enhance our spiritual life and the life of the church, making us better people and a better church, a church, as I have been preaching about, “Alive in the Spirit.”

Jesus told Nicodemus that the Spirit is like the wind; we cannot see it, but we can see its effects. Sometimes the Spirit comes like a hurricane blowing into our lives, rearranging everything. Sometimes the Spirit comes like a gentle, soothing summer breeze. The choral anthem you will soon hear, “Breathe on Me Breath of God”, is a beautiful expression of the soft quiet changes the Spirit can bring. Sometimes the Spirit brings peace and joy. Other times as in Celtic Christianity, the Spirit is a Wild Goose, leading us out and leading us on to where

we most need to go and where God most needs for us to go. You can't domesticate the Holy Spirit!

II

On Pentecost the Spirit came rushing in like a mighty wind. And as I suggested last week, the greater miracle of that day was the miracle of *hearing*—more than speaking, as in speaking in unknown tongues. I honor those who have been given the gift of unknown tongues. It is their prayer language, deeper than our words can fathom. It can be a beautiful thing to hear and to experience.

But on Pentecost people from all over the world gathered there could hear and understand one another even though they spoke different languages! Do you ever think that in our relationships we speak very different languages? The Spirit helps us hear one another, really hear and understand. It is not easy; so it needs to be a spiritual practice, this quiet, patient listening where we still our hearts and minds enough to take in and understand what another is trying to communicate about something important to them.

What keeps us from listening? A clue is in Paul's two lists of the *works of the flesh* and the *fruits of the Spirit*.

The list of the workings of the “flesh” include things like enmity, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension “party-spirit”—which is not being a “party animal” but one wrapped up in partisan energies—and envy. “Flesh” means ego-driven.

Such things can muddy our hearing and understanding of one another. But Paul next lists the fruit of the Spirit which can help us in listening to one another, things like patience, kindness and gentleness.

So let’s practice the presence of the Spirit and develop the gift and art of listening.

III

Now we turn to Ephesians, where Paul writes:

I therefore...beg you to live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Some of these words were in early Baptist church covenants.

In our age of self-actualization, what can lowliness and meekness mean? I think it means doing enough inner work not to be ego-driven. I think it means bowing to the divine in in each of us. An American Buddhist teacher speaks of entering as a novice monk into a Buddhist monastery. His abbot instructed him

that he must bow before everyone who has been a monk there longer than he. He went back to his cell and thought: Well, that means *everybody*! What about that monk who has an anger problem, the one who is slovenly about his chores, or what about that guy who is only here because he couldn't make it in the outside world? Then he realized the wisdom of it. We are honoring the divine in each of us, or as the Quakers say, "the inner light" in each of us.

Paul also calls us to the spiritual practice of "forbearance", an old fashioned sounding word. We "bear with" one another. We take into account what a person may be going through. If they have things that irritate us or bother us, we understand that their lives may have suffered some things that make them like that, things we could not possibly know.

In church and in all important relationships we practice the form of love called forbearance. We are "patient" with one another's foibles. As we learn to acknowledge our own foibles, even to laugh at them, we can be more forbearing of other's idiosyncrasies, weaknesses, faults. Any of us mortals here today *not* in need of the forbearance of others?!

Then Paul gets to the heart of it as it applies to the church: "eager" he writes, "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There must be an eagerness in us to do the holy work of maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We are not lackadaisical about it. Unity is a mark of the Spirit. Let

us not settle for less. Let peace-making and yearning for unity be our spiritual practice.

IV

Now let's turn to Galatians and to what Paul enumerates as "the fruit of the Spirit." Other places he talks about the various "gifts of the Spirit", different for each of us, that help us minister to others in our own God-called ways. But the fruit of the Spirit are what God wants for *all* of us, and God wants for all of us, *all* of them! All nine:

Love, joy, peace
patience, kindness, goodness,
faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

So we practice love, practice joy, practice peace, practice patience. In a Kudzu comic strip, the Reverend Will B. Done is on his knees praying. First frame: "Lord, give me patience!" Second frame, he is still on his knees waiting. Third frame: he looks up and says, "Well?!"

We practice kindness, such a rare thing in our world. We practice goodness. Some sneer at the notion of goodness; but real goodness is a beautiful thing. We practice faithfulness. Faith is not just a feeling within, it is a loyalty to God, even

when God seems nowhere to be found. It also means loyalty to the things God loves, as the hymn the choir will sing goes:

Breathe on me breath of God,
fill me with life anew,
that I may love what thou dost love,
and do that thou would'st do.

We practice gentleness both with others and with ourselves. Perhaps we start with gentleness to ourselves.

Then Paul adds at the end of the list, “self-control.” We might call it “self-maintenance” or “self-monitoring.” Just before his list of the fruits of the Spirit, Paul lists the works of the flesh, and they are all about the self out of control. The self run amok! So, Come Holy Spirit come, free us from a life oriented around the self and its insistent desires.

All nine of the fruits of the Spirit are really forms of love—as the colors of the rainbow are all in the spectrum of light: Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Come, Holy Spirit, fire of love, in your full spectrum of love and light.

Can we cultivate the Spirit, practice Pentecost? The Table we will soon share is one of the “practices”, and Christ through the Spirit joins us here.