

Almost every Sunday, we celebrate somebody's birthday. Well, today we celebrate Pentecost, the birth of the Christian Church. While Pentecost is not celebrated as much as Easter and Christmas in the Christian calendar, it is still one of the most important days in the history of the Church. Originally it was a Jewish holiday that occurred fifty days after the Sabbath of the Passover. Historically it had two purposes: first, to celebrate the Lord giving Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai; and secondly, to present the first fruits of the barley harvest to the Lord God.

But the Pentecost following the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave was the most memorable one of all; for it was a turning point in the history of the world and the beginning of the Church as we know it today. The Apostle Luke records this historical event in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, verses 1-21. Now I am not going to read verses 9-11 because there are some names in these verses that this old redneck engineer from Clemson cannot pronounce.

Read Acts 2:1-8 and 12-21

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and the Christian Church was born. In the fourteenth and sixteenth chapters of the Gospel of John, Jesus promised to send a Counselor to teach the disciples, to guide them and to show them the truth. Here is the fulfillment of this promise. From this moment on the Holy Spirit becomes a dominant reality not only in the life of the Early Church, but in the Church throughout history to the present time. It is important to note that the Spirit did not come just to visit, but to abide, to become the driving force behind the spread of Christianity.

On the Day of Pentecost all the disciples and other followers were gathered together in one place. Suddenly the sound of a violent wind filled the room and tongues of fire come to rest on each of them. The appearance of the Spirit was marked by the sound of the wind and the sight of fire. If you remember John the Baptist had predicted that Jesus would not baptize with water but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. All of the people in the room were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them.

Were they speaking in tongues or were they able to speak in the languages of all the different nationalities that had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost? Who knows – what we do know is that for the first time in their lives this group of bystanders were hearing the Word of God in such a way that their hearts were touched as never before; in a way that they could understand. The power of the Spirit was such that it had given these simple disciples a message that could reach every heart. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were speaking in the universal language of God – love, and it touched the hearts of their listeners.

Now some in the crowd were amazed that these simple uneducated fishermen from Galilee were suddenly able to speak in so many different languages. However, there is always a critic or naysayer in every crowd, and thus, some joked that they were just drunk. However, Peter, the disciple who had denied knowing Jesus three times out of fear on the night He was arrested, now boldly stood up and told them that they couldn't be drunk, it was too early; it was only nine o'clock in the morning. After explaining that this was the fulfillment of the prophecy by the prophet Joel, Peter went on to share the gospel message with them.

Now most likely you have heard this story on each Pentecost Sunday and sat through many sermons covering a wide range of topics; however, in the time we have this morning, I want to focus on the fire – the fire that came upon the church at Pentecost. In the Bible, fire is associated with the divine presence of God, purification, and judgment. For example, God first appeared to Moses in a burning bush, then the Israelites were led out of Egypt and across the wilderness by a pillar of fire at night, and then God appeared to them on Mount Sinai in the fire. Fire in these cases was a symbol of holiness. Jesus also often referred to fire when discussing the final judgment.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was represented by tongues of fire coming to rest on each person present. Once the Spirit came upon the Church, it has never been quite the same since. However, we, and I'm talking about the Church locally and universal, have at times forgotten the Holy Spirit or put it in a closet only to bring it out on special occasions such as Pentecost Sunday. Look around the church today, do you see fire in it – I mean do you see it alive with the Spirit, doing what Jesus commanded it to do in Matthew 28:19-20 – “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Two men were talking as they watched a church being destroyed by fire. The first man said to the other man: “This is the first time I have ever seen you at church.” To which the second man replied: “This is the first time that I have ever seen the church on fire.”

Yes, there are a few churches here and there that show some life at times, and we might be among them. But overall, the Church has lost its fire; if anything, it's a small flame, a pilot light, instead of the blazing glory that it was created to be. We have lost the power of the Spirit of the Early Church. Listen to what happened in verse 41 after Peter led by the Spirit shared the Good News at Pentecost: “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about 3,000 were added to their numbers.” In other words, 3,000 people joined the church as a result of Peter's being led by the Spirit; now that's more than three times as many people who joined the entire New Mexico Annual Conference of the Methodist Church last year. In addition, although our attendance is growing here at High Desert, the New Mexico Conference is experiencing decreases in worship attendance and membership. In Peter's day, people were

knocking down the door to get into church. However today, there are empty pews throughout our sanctuaries. Why is this happening; are we really using the power of the Spirit as Jesus intended?

This reminds me of a story of a city dweller who moved to a farm and bought a milk cow. A short time later the cow went dry. He discussed this with a neighboring farmer. The city slicker said that he was confused as to why this happened. "I can't understand it," he said, "If ever a person was considerate of an animal, I was of that cow. If I didn't need any milk, I didn't milk her. If I only needed a quart, I only took a quart." Now with the facts, the farmer tried to explain to the city slicker that the only way to keep the milk flowing was to not take as little as possible from the cow, but to take as much as possible. In the same way, the Church may be going dry today because it has not taken full advantage of the power of the Holy Spirit.

During Lent, we discussed the history of the Early Church as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. As I study these passages, I get the feeling that we have lost the fire, passion, and determination of the Early Church. In addition, we have drifted from our roots as Methodists. And what are these roots? Well, they are not much different from those of the Early Church. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, stressed the old time religion, the religion of the Bible, the religion of the Church born at Pentecost. The hallmark of the Church is the Christian life – one of faith and love put into action. Emphasis is placed on personal spiritual growth, accountability, sharing one's faith, and service to our neighbors. We are called to witness and serve the world around us.

The Early Church focused on a threefold approach – a personal relationship with the Lord, evangelism and service. The strength of any local church is directly related to the spiritual well-being of those who worship there. Just because we have accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior does not mean that we are perfect and can sit back and relax. I don't agree with the theology of "once saved, always saved." We are each called to grow spiritually each day on a steady diet of solid food – God's Word; having a daily quiet time and being involved in a weekly Bible study. Ours is a journey, striving to live each day the best we can and trying to become more Christ-like each and every day.

Now the word evangelism turns some people and a lot of churches off. Many churches operate under the "Field of Dreams" philosophy; you know open the doors on Sunday morning and they will come. But Jesus made it very clear in the Great Commission that as His followers we are to make disciples of all nations, all people, including those who live in our community and next door to us. We are called to share our faith through our words and how we live our daily lives. This is one area where the church and we as its members have lost the fire and the approach of the Early Church. Someone once asked me why the Methodist Church wasn't growing. My answer was simple, we are lazy! We sit in our offices waiting for people to come to us.

Well, it doesn't work that way. Jesus set the example by going out among the people; where they worked, lived and played. As I have said before, Jesus didn't have a church office; He was always out in the mission field. The disciples followed His example and Christianity spread all over the world. Wesley recognized this principle and said that the world was his parish. Did you know that Wesley rode 250,000 miles on horseback proclaiming God's Word. And he expected that we would follow this same approach that the Lord Himself had given us. But you know what, many churches have gotten complacent, going out among the people just doesn't fit their busy personal schedules; it takes us away from our computers, zoom meetings, and smartphones. And let's be honest, we just are not comfortable doing it. So our approach is to just see who comes through the door each Sunday morning; that should be good enough; let's just do enough to get by and not utilize all or any of the power of the Spirit. However, if we are going to rekindle the fire and become the people that Jesus expects us to be, we must heed His command and go where the Spirit leads us in our families, neighborhood, and community. Remember Jesus' command in the Great Commission is very clear; He said "Go;" He didn't say sit, wait or form a committee.

The Church is also called to care for those in need. In His parable on the sheep and goats in Matthew 25, Jesus told us to feed the hungry, provide a cup of cool water to those who are thirsty, welcome strangers, provide clothing for those in need, care for the sick, and visit those in prison. If you look at the history of the Early Church as recorded in Acts, you will see that they focused on caring for each other, sharing their possessions and healing the sick.

As a church we are trying to address this call by our support and active involvement in the Pantry, Feed New Mexico Kids, Interfaith Bible Center, MorningStar, St. Joseph Mission School, mission trips, and other outreach ministries. But we can't rest on our laurels and past accomplishments. I feel that God is calling us to reach out in more areas. The outreach of any church springs from the working of the Holy Spirit. And I feel that the Spirit is calling us to even more activities and outreach efforts.

Dwight L. Moody said that he believed that the Church has made a mistake in thinking that Pentecost was just a onetime miracle that could not be repeated. Moody believed that we should pray to restore the old fire of Pentecost again. There's power in the Spirit and nothing is impossible when it is done in the name of Jesus Christ. As Christians we are called to share the Good News, to help each other grow spiritually, and to love and care for our neighbors. Let us pray that we as individuals and as a church will follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit; ask Him where He is leading us to witness; where He wants us to serve; and what new ministries He wants us to start. Pray that God will rekindle the fire of the Spirit within us and fan the flame that is already burning here. As we will sing in our closing hymn: "Revive us again; fill each heart with Thy love; may each soul be rekindled with fire from above." Wouldn't it be great if the word got around Rio Rancho that the Methodists were drunk, drunk with the Spirit. Let's keep the fire burning and let's set Rio Rancho on fire for the Lord! Amen