

Sermon ✝ June 5, 2022

John 14:8-17, 25-27

Frank H. Maxwell

A famous preacher once remarked that Christian hymn books would be in big trouble if the words "dove," "love," and "above" did not happen to rhyme in the English language. This remark is especially apt on the day of Pentecost. The dove is the biblical symbol of the Holy Spirit, which is God's *love* in action and it comes from *above*.

This, in short, is the meaning of Pentecost. But on this day, meaning is not enough. When it comes to spiritual matters, we need to see our faith in visible, concrete action.

Bishop Newbigin of the Church of India used to point out that when a prospector strikes oil, there is often a violent eruption which bursts into flame and burns for many days. Afterwards the oil is pumped through pipes and refined through manmade channels to its ultimate destination.

What began as a terrifying display of power settles down finally into productive business. So it is with the phenomenon we call Pentecost. Its power finds visible expression in and through the church. The church is the instrument of the spirit of god among our common humanity.

Today we celebrate the birthday of the church. But, whenever we mention the church, we get all kinds of opinions and interpretations. Ask the average person on the street about the church and you are likely to get all kinds of answers.

*"The church is totally irrelevant to contemporary secular culture."*

*"Those within the church are no better than those on the outside."*

*"Nothing crucial is happening in the church today...its time is up."*

Ask somebody else and they will tell you that the church is just another goodwill organization that is sadly lacking in political clout.

Now, set over against these attitudes and opinions this amazing story from the second chapter of the Book of Acts. This little group of early Christians was shaping itself in the quiet and obscurity of that upper room. And, suddenly, something entirely new came into their lives and they became obsessed and possessed by a sense of power that sent them out as a church with a mission to the outside world.

There were those who thought these people were drunk. But Peter spoke up and said, *"No, you've got it all wrong. These people have tasted the new wine."* They were filled with God. God had given them something very special.

There is a given-ness to the church. It is the product of something given. The real question for us today is: *What does this given-ness of the church make of us?* Ever since Jesus' resurrection, every Sunday is a little Easter. By the same token, every service of Christian worship ought to be a little Pentecost.

It is when we are open to God and wait upon God in expectation.  
It is when the spirit of God breaks through and we see with spiritual eyes.  
It is when we experience with glowing hearts the dove in love descending from above.

It is Pentecost and what if in our ornate sanctuaries as we praise and pray before God . . . there should occur a sudden and mysterious stirring of our souls . . . what difference might it make? Would we begin to live out our beliefs rather than merely recite our creeds?

Our creeds are important for they tie us to our beliefs and the past. But if we are to bring the necessary excitement to the cause of Christ today, we need to do more than perpetuate the wording of our creeds. We must act upon them.

If we don't live out our beliefs, we are in danger of becoming what someone has called "ice box" Christians—well preserved but lacking in influence.

To declare one's position about a creed without ever making some kind of active witness is a contradiction. Belief and conduct are inseparable. The fervor with which those first Christians lived out their faith came not as a result of what they believed, but in whom they believed.

We need to make sure that ours is a living faith. And if there would be this sudden stirring of our souls, we would also be captured by a new sense of mission rather than simply being absorbed by our plans.

The modern church needs to take great care lest we think we can only be successful by adopting the strategies of modern-day business. And, yes, long-range planning is important but in the midst of planning, we can lose sight of our mission. For whenever we lose sight of our mission, we are apt to spend too much precious time and valuable resources to simply keep the wheels of the church spinning. And, oh, how we love to hear those wheels spin!

On that first day of Pentecost, the mission of the infant church could never have been whose plans should we adopt. It was a matter of whose purpose ought we to serve. There can be no preconceived pattern because mission is an adventure. It is a matter of where to go and what to do . . . but never how to go.

It is Pentecost again. Can you feel it? Do you sense a sudden and mysterious stirring of your soul?

And if you do, is it going to make a difference in your life?

Let us thank and praise God this day.

For long ago, God came to us,  
In love . . . like a dove . . . from above.

Amen.