

June 8, 2014
Pentecost 2014
Incomplete Christianity
Acts 2:1-4/ Acts 19:1-7

Opening words: It is hard to believe, but fifty days have passed since Easter. That means today is Pentecost. In the Old Testament, it was also called the Feast of Weeks (Deuteronomy 16:10), or the Feast of the Harvest (Exodus 23:16). Regardless of the name, it was comparable to our Thanksgiving Day, a time to celebrate the harvest. However, in our time, Pentecost is remembered as much more. It is remembered as the day the Holy Spirit was unleashed on the entire body of believers, and the church was created. Listen to what I am about to say. The Holy Spirit was not created on Pentecost. He is part of our understanding of God, himself. He is even mentioned in the creation story. (Genesis 1:26) What makes Pentecost different is the Holy Spirit's availability. Prior to Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was only available to political or religious leaders. Since Pentecost, all the believers were transformed by the Divine Helper.

Former President of Asbury Seminary, Maxie Dunnam, has spent his life studying the miracles in the Bible. He says the greatest miracle in the Bible is the resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning; it is the heart of our faith. According to Dunnam, the second greatest miracle in the Bible is Pentecost. He says it is truly miraculous that God was able to unite all those different kinds of people. The traditional scripture reading on Pentecost is our first scripture reading for today, Acts 2:1-4. Our primary text for today comes second, Acts 19:1-7. Let me call this message *Incomplete Christianity*.

Acts 19:1-7 ¹While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples ² and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when^[a] you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."³ So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied.⁴ Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus."⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.⁶ When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.⁷ There were about twelve men in all.

They tell me that in Greece there is an ancient tree. It is located near the home of Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, in the Greek Isles. It is a huge olive tree, which is approximately 2,400 years old. From a distance it looks good. She is massive in size, as her limbs reach into the sky. However, a closer examination tells a different story. The tree is dying. They say it is rotting from the inside out. Her massive limbs now require support. She produces very few leaves and less fruit. Experts say it is only a matter of time. It will take a miracle to save her.

The story of that ancient tree reminds me of the story of many churches in our land. From a distance, they look good. They boast a proud past as their massive structures dominate their neighborhoods. Their pastors are well educated and the congregations are filled with nice people. From a distance, everything looks good, but a closer examination reveals the truth. They are dying. The once large Sunday morning crowds are now down to a small group. All the heads are bald or gray. The large sums of money that used to go to missionaries around the world are now spent on their own survival. The discussions of future conquests have been replaced by past victories. Limited space has been replaced by emptiness. Experts say it is only a matter of time. They are rotting from the inside out. It will take a miracle to save them. The question used to be, do you know of any dying churches? The question now is, how many dying churches do you know? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" Let's look at this morning's scripture lesson.

We are in the nineteenth chapter of Acts. Paul is on his way to Rome, so he is on his third missionary journey. He stops in various communities along the way. In the nineteenth chapter, he is in Ephesus. The church in Ephesus was headed by a man named Apollos. We were first introduced to him in the previous chapter (18:24). He was an educated man with natural leadership skills. He spoke accurately about the Lord, but had only received John's baptism. In other words, he had never been filled with the Holy Spirit (18:25). His understanding was based on moralism, not grace. He passed that understanding on to his church. Paul recognizes this incompleteness of that congregation, and corrects the situation. He baptizes them in the name of Jesus and lays his hands on them. With that simple act, the Holy Spirit came upon them. Just like in the second chapter of Acts, they began to speak in tongues and prophesy. (19:6) The final verse tells us, there were twelve men who received the Holy Spirit on that day. It is a wonderful little story, but what does it teach our generation? The answer to that question is not pretty.

The twelve men in the story are like so many in our time. Their Christianity was incomplete until they received the Holy Spirit. Our Christianity is incomplete until we receive the Holy Spirit. That fact is so common in our church today. There are many theories out there as to why the church is struggling. Everyone has been blamed. The community surrounding the church has been blamed. The community changed. The faces in the community no longer match the faces in the church. The parishioners have been blamed. Sunday morning is no longer just a time for God. It is a time for soccer and hockey too. Or, the church members are too inflexible. You fell in love with a worship style that spoke to the greatest generation, who are dying at an alarming rate. The clergy have been blamed. We just aren't showing enough leadership. Can I be honest with you? I have grown tired of everyone being blamed. This is my opinion. Do you know why the church is struggling? The primary reason the church is dying in our time is spiritual in nature. We are rotting from the inside out. Could it be we are like the twelve men in the story? Could it be our Christianity is incomplete? We haven't experienced the Holy Spirit, so our understanding of God is based on moral behavior,

not grace. We have no hope of survival until we experience the Holy Spirit for ourselves. Physical power has to do with what we can do to others. Spiritual power has more to do with what God will do with us. So this is the question you must answer for yourself today:

Have you experienced the Holy Spirit?

To help you answer that question, I am going to ask you two questions. The way you answer those two questions will be very revealing. Both deal with your priorities. Are you motivated by earthly things, or are you motivated by God? Be honest with yourself so you can answer the question, *Have you experienced the Holy Spirit?* If you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

Question #1: Are you more passionate about people, or property? The answer should be obvious. However, it is not obvious to everyone. What we say and what we do are often two different things. For example, I have never been in the middle of a large church debate about human need. I have never been part of a big church debate to borrow money to help the forgotten. I am still waiting for the first person to fundraise to fight world hunger or homelessness. However, I have been in the middle of debates to help not just maintain our property, but improve our property. Ask yourself the question again. Are you more passionate about people, or property? If you have been touched by the Holy Spirit, then the only thing that really matters is people.

One of the greatest preachers of the 20th century is a man by the name of Fred Craddock. He taught homiletics at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. I admire him because he can really tell a story. He once told a story about his early days in the ministry. He volunteered to help with his church's Vacation Bible School. In those days, it lasted two weeks and he was assigned to the Middle School class. He was assigned that class because no one wanted to teach it. No one wanted to teach it because there was one horrible boy in that class none of the other teachers could stand. Fred admitted that he would pray that that boy would get sick so he wouldn't come to VBS. However, he came every day, because his mother forced him to come. As the second week came to an end, Fred grew tired, especially of that horrible boy. Needing some relief, he gave his class an assignment. They were told to go into the woods behind the church building and come back with something that reminded them of God. Fred prayed a wild animal might get that horrible boy so he wouldn't come back at all. In time, the class returned. All the students had something. A girl brought back a rock because it reminded her of God, a firm foundation. Another girl brought back a flower because it was beautiful like God. A boy brought back a brown leaf because God is in charge of the seasons. Of course, that horrible boy brought back nothing. He just stood there with his little sister. Fred asked that horrible boy, why didn't you bring something back that reminded you of God? The horrible boy responded, "I did, my little sister. I prayed years ago for a baby sister and God heard my prayers. My sister reminds me of God and God's miracles." Fred said he stood there in silence, because that horrible little boy was right! It is all about people.

In the creation story, God created everything, and everything was good. He made the earth and the sky. He made the seas and the dry ground. He made the fish and the animals and the insects. When God created those things, he said they were all good. However, when he made mankind, he said something different. God looked at mankind and said it was *very* good. Every person is made in the image of God. Every person deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. What is more important to you, people or property? Once you have experienced the Holy Spirit, the only thing that matters is people! And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Question #2: Are you more passionate about the invisible, or the visible church? In other words, are you more interested in Jesus, or the organizational church? Do you have an easier time quoting church rules, or Bible verses? Are you more comfortable talking about local church history, or what God has done for you today? Do you have an easier time listing past pastors, or disciples? The Holy Spirit only cares about the invisible or spiritual church. Have you stopped to consider the word 'Methodist' isn't even found in the Bible?

Several weeks ago, I was texting a regular worshipper of this church. They have been coming here for years, and I consider them one of us. The problem is, she and her husband have never joined. I was trying to correct that situation. She texted me this question, what do we have to do to join? She meant classes or something. I responded, "Nothing. All you need to know is Jesus and me." How do you feel about that response? Maybe you do feel like we need classes or something? I do not require classes because my goal is not to make good church members or great United Methodists. My goal is to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, which is the mission statement of the United Methodist Church. It really doesn't matter if you know how many annual conferences exist or how long a bishop serves. It really doesn't matter if you know about the history of Western Reserve Church. It only matters that you know Jesus. If you know Jesus, then you are part of the invisible church. Are you more passionate about the invisible, or the visible church? The Holy Spirit only cares about the invisible church. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

One of the great dates in Methodist history is May 24, 1738. For it was on that date that John Wesley (1703-1791), the founder of Methodism, experienced the Holy Spirit first-hand. It happened on Aldersgate Street in London. John Wesley was transformed from a "loser" into one of the great figures in church history. When he died in 1791, he had 79,000 followers in England and the United States. His movement lived beyond his life. In 1957, there were 40 million Methodists in the world. It all began in a little chapel on Aldersgate Street.

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead (1893-1976) recognized the significance of that spot and went to visit it. When he arrived it was dark and damp. He read the single bronze plaque on the wall. It read: On this spot on May 24, 1738, John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed. He read it several times, once out loud.

He then retreated to the corner of the chapel and found a pew. In the silence, he thought and prayed about that moment in history. Suddenly, he heard the door open and watched a shadowy character walk in. It was an older gentleman. (He was 57!) He walked straight toward the plaque. Thinking he was alone, he too read it out loud: "On this spot on May 24, 1738, John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed." Yet, instead of sitting in silence, the older gentleman spoke. He said, "Do it again, Lord. Do it again for me!" I would add, do it again for us!

We are just like that ancient tree on the Greek Isles. We are dying, rotting from the inside out. Our only hope isn't going to come from a new program or a new style of leadership. Please don't send me to another continuing education event. The problem is, our Christianity is incomplete. It is true. We are more concerned with moral behavior than grace. We have a shortage of people who have experienced the Holy Spirit. Our only hope is that God does it again to us! Have you ever experienced the Holy Spirit? If you are not sure how to answer that question, then look at your passions. Are you more passionate about people, or property? Are you more passionate about the invisible, or the visible church? David Wilkerson of Cross and the Switchblade fame once said, *"When you strip it of everything else, Pentecost stands for power and life. That's what came into the church when the Holy Spirit came down on the day of Pentecost."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**