

May 31, 2020

Pentecost 2020

Why is Pentecost Important?

Acts 2:1-7

Today, I begin a new twelve-part sermon series called *Majoring in the Minors*. It is my 2020 summer sermon series. By Labor Day we will look at each one of the Minor Prophets. They are considered minor not because they have nothing to say. They are considered minor because their books are brief, unlike the Major Prophets, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel.

We begin by looking at Joel. His name means "Jehovah is God." His name is not mentioned outside of this book. He lived approximately 600 years before the birth of Christ. Like other prophets, his message was one of repentance. That repentance was necessary to escape the plague of the locusts. Joel maybe one of the Minor Prophets but he makes one of the great prophecies in the Bible. It is Joel who prophesies about Pentecost. The Holy Spirit will come and be available to all people. No longer limited to religious or political leaders. The Holy Spirit will be available to all. The traditional scripture reading on Pentecost is Acts 2:1-7. Let me call this message *Why is Pentecost Important?*

Joel 2:28-29 "And afterward,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.
²⁹ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

Opening words: I want to begin this message with a confession. I began working on this message on Monday evening. I started by reading my Pentecost messages from the past ten years. Each one had the same theme. The church is dying because our generation of the church has not experienced the Holy Spirit. Annually, I implored you to not just learn about the Holy Spirit. I challenged you to experience the Holy Spirit, so we could save the church. It became one of my favorite themes. You may remember one of those messages. I will be the first one to admit it. I was wrong!

I have learned a great deal during this pandemic. One of the things I have learned is about your spiritual maturity. You have all been great, so flexible, and generous. For the past ten years, I was preaching to the choir, so to speak, you obviously experienced the Holy Spirit somewhere in your past and have an appreciation of the Holy Spirit today. On this Pentecost Sunday, I am proud to stand with you as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Today, we remember one of the great days in the history of the church,

Pentecost, together.

Acts 2:1-7 1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. 5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?"

It was called Youth Jam. It was an evangelistic event sponsored by the East Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church. It was a Christian conference held annually, rotating between Akron and Cleveland. Their target audience was teenagers. Their goal was to win souls and mature disciples for Jesus Christ. Their agenda included a series of Christian singers and speakers. For several years, this church sent youth to Youth Jam. I am glad we did.

One afternoon at Youth Jam, the Christian speaker was a former beauty pageant winner. No one in my family can remember her name, but everyone one agrees she was a powerful speaker. She told some stories about the pageant and she gave her witness. As she spoke the spirit in the auditorium began to change. By the time she was done speaking, the Holy Spirit was thick in the room and everyone knew God was going to do something special. It was at that moment she did it. She encouraged everyone to stand up and look to the back of the auditorium. Then she asked everyone to get on their knees, placing their hands on their seats. From that position, she led them in prayer and the Holy Spirit rolled over the crowd. Words cannot capture the experience. She closed that prayer with an invitation. All those young people would have to do, is raise their hands if they wanted to accept Jesus Christ. I do not know how many hands were raised on that day, but I do know one hand was raised. That hand belonged to my daughter. It was not an emotional response to the moment. It was a commitment that changed her life. Today, her faith is genuine and sincere. I am thankful the Holy Spirit attended Youth Jam that day. Heaven would not be the same for me if Anna were missing. Things happen when the Holy Spirit is in the house. Do you believe the Holy Spirit is with us today? Let us look at this morning's scripture lesson.

We are in the second chapter of Acts. The first verse tells us it is the day of Pentecost, on the Hebrew calendar it was a festival to celebrate the harvest, based on Leviticus 23:16. The disciples had no clue what was about to happen. The twelve are all together, including Judas Iscariot's replacement, Matthias. They are in Jerusalem because Jesus told them to stay in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4). For it is in the Golden City that they will be baptized by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). According to the Bible, the baptism happened suddenly.

The author of this text, Luke, tells us the Holy Spirit was evident in two ways. First, there was a violent wind. The Holy Spirit was always symbolized by wind in the Bible. (Ezekiel 37:9, 14, John 3:8) Second, there seemed to be tongues of fires that separated and came to rest on each one of them. Verse four explains what had happened. It says, *"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit..."* The word ALL is important because it was the first time the Holy Spirit was given to everyone. In the Old Testament it was limited to a select few. The manifestation of the spirit was that each one began to speak in different tongues. It was just as the prophet Joel had predicted six hundred years earlier. The Holy Spirit changed everything. The church was born and the world we never be the same again.

Pentecost is one of the great days in the history of the church. However, let us be completely honest. It does not stack up with the rest of the other church holidays. You know it is true. We all love Christmas. We love seeing the decorations and singing the carols. We love collecting a variety of things to ensure everyone has a Merry Christmas. I love the poinsettias and preaching to the crowd on Christmas Eve. I love preaching to the big crowds on Easter morning. I like the Easter flowers and remembering the various events of Holy Week. Those are great days in the life of the church, but let us be honest, Pentecost cannot hold a candle to Christmas and Easter. The best we can do is bring in a few geraniums. Even Mother's Day generates more excitement than Pentecost. Yet, that does not mean Pentecost is not important. Pentecost is very important. Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) once said, *"Without Pentecost, the Christ event - the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus - remains imprisoned in history as something to remember, think about and reflect on. The Spirit of Jesus comes to dwell within us, so we are Christs here and now."* In other words, Pentecost is important! So why is Pentecost important? So why is Pentecost important?

There are six reasons why Pentecost is still important. These thoughts are not original. They come from Christian blogger Daniel Threlfall.

- 1. Pentecost reminds us of the Holy Spirit.** Francis Chan (born 1967) has said, for some Christians, the Holy Spirit has become the forgotten God. We talk about God and we talk about Jesus, but the Holy Spirit is seldom mentioned. It maybe that we are afraid of the Holy Spirit or ignorant of the Holy Spirit. When we celebrate Pentecost, we must accept the existence of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is about the Holy Spirit.
- 2. Pentecost reminds us of the power of the Holy Spirit.** The one word that summarizes the events of Pentecost is power. There was the mighty wind, the strange appearance of flame, zealous evangelism, and the speaking in foreign tongues. They all happen because of the power of God. Things happen when the Holy Spirit is in the house. Pentecost is about power.

3. Pentecost reminds us of the importance of the Great Commission.

There is a direct connection between the Great Commission (Matthew 28:1-10) and Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is not in our lives to entertain or amuse us. The Holy Spirit is part of our lives to help us make disciples for Jesus Christ. It is impossible to make disciples for Jesus Christ without the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was part of your conversion. Pentecost is about the Great Commission.

4. Pentecost encourages us in our labor. The Book of Acts begins with a bang – the Holy Spirit arrives. The rest of the Book of Acts is a grind. Have you ever served on a church committee and you began to feel like your term would never end? Have you ever agreed to teach Sunday school for a year, and it turned into a decade? Have you ever spent hours writing a sermon and no one comes because the weather is too cool? (Wait, that is my story!) It is not just true of the disciples. It is true of you and me. Church work is a grind. In God’s church, disciple making is a never-ending task. It is our preoccupation. The Holy Spirit encourages us to keep going. Pentecost is about encouragement.

5. Pentecost gives us hope. The disciples hide out for ten days after Jesus’s ascension. That is a long time just to wait. Perhaps, they needed that ten days to rest. Perhaps, they needed to think? They knew their human limitation and they know their great challenge waiting for them. Prior to Pentecost, they were hopeless disciples. After Pentecost, they were hopeful Apostles. Our world has a shortage of hope. Pentecost is about hope.

6. Pentecost overwhelms us with awe. The Holy Spirit makes us hungry for God. The Holy Spirit reminds us there is more than just this world. The Holy Spirit reminds us this world is not big enough. Would you like to see the face of Jesus when you get to heaven? Pentecost overwhelms us with awe.

Pentecost is important because Pentecost is about the Holy Spirit. Let me end with this story.

I was not born into the United Methodist Church. My parents were members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It had been my father’s family denomination for decades. I have very little negative to say about that denomination. It is not my place to judge them. I have known many fine people within their ranks. I left that denomination for a variety of reasons. One was social. Everyone I knew in college was going into the United Methodist ministry. One was practical. I found the guaranteed appointment appealing. I may move occasionally but I would always have a job. It did not work out that way. I am not the poster boy for itineracy. One was theological. My understanding of the Holy Spirit, based on my experiences, did not match that denomination’s understanding of the Holy Spirit. I find the Holy Spirit to be vital to my

faith. Some within that denomination find the Holy Spirit optional. It was a hard decision, but I am glad I left. The United Methodist Church has been good to me. My final decision to leave the Disciples was based on something that came in the mail. This is the story.

When I in seminary, my mother would write me letters. There were no cell phones at that time. No email. She would write about things that were happening at home and sent newspaper clippings. There was always a twenty-dollar bill enclosed to encourage and help me. One day she sent me an article from a national magazine. It was quite impressive. It was in full color and well written. The article was about my childhood denomination. The author of the article had interviewed the national head of that denomination. It was interesting. He gave some history and was excited about their bright future. According to the article, that denomination is non-creedal. In other words, they did not have any creeds. I never recited any creeds, including the Apostle's Creed, until I became a United Methodist. They have a famous line in that denomination, *no creed but Christ, no book but the Bible*. When I was younger, I found that line liberating. Then, I met people who abused that freedom. There are some within that denomination who are non-trinitarian. That means they believe in the existence of God, the creator of the universe, and they believe the historical Jesus, the redeemer. However, they do not believe in the existence of the Holy Spirit. I find that part of their theology to be repulsive. The Holy Spirit gives us life. The Holy Spirit makes us relevant. I have never been able to answer this question. How do you not believe in the Holy Spirit? When the Holy Spirit is in the house things happen. When the Holy Spirit is not in the house nothing happens.

Do you remember the quote from Henri Nouwen? He was correct. He once said, *"Without Pentecost the Christ event -the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – remains imprisoned in history as something to remember, think about and reflect on. The Spirit of Jesus comes to dwell within us, so we are Christ's here and now."* May we take this Pentecost and celebrate the difference he has made in our lives!