

Sermon preached by The Rev. Chris McManus, Deacon of St. John's Episcopal Parish, Clayton, CA on Sunday, May 27, 2007

Now we come to the feast of Pentecost, which is the 50th day of Easter. The word Pentecost itself means 50th day. A week ago Thursday, the Church celebrated the Ascension, when Jesus went up bodily into heaven, ending the final period with his disciples after he rose from the dead. And today marks the beginning of the next phase of the disciples' lives. We often call it the birthday of the Christian Church.

The day of Pentecost was already a religious feast in Judaism. The 50th day after the beginning of Passover, which, of course, coincided with the 50th day of Easter, was the feast of Shavuot. Originally this feast celebrated the "first fruits" of the spring harvest. It was a feast thanking God for the growth of food again in the new year, kind of like when you first have creamed peas and new potatoes in the spring, and they taste so good that you remember why you love God.

Then later, after the Biblical era, the Jews began to associate this feast with Moses' receipt of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, because according Exodus 19, that event took place on the 50th day after the Jews left Egypt. Although the disciples did not have this piece of context, we have it available to us today to put into the mix as we contemplate the events recounted in the reading from Acts.

So let's back up for a moment and recount what's been happening with the disciples since Easter. During this time, Jesus has been appearing to the disciples at various times and places—in the room where they were all staying, at the lake, on the road to Emmaus—and during these visits, Jesus has continued to teach them, explain the scriptures, to address their spiritual growth, to talk about their various futures. To replicate this experience liturgically, at least in Year C, we alternate gospel readings about these various visits of Jesus with passages from John's account of Jesus long conversation with the disciples on the night before he died.

That discourse is all about the love between God and us and the love we are to have for one another. It is about our oneness with God and how to live in that reality. Jesus tells them over and over that although he isn't going to be with them in the same way, the spirit of God will be with them teaching them, inspiring them, helping them to discern the truth. During one of these visits after Easter, we have the event in today's gospel, where Jesus

breathed on the disciples and told them to receive the spirit of God into themselves, and to forgive sins.

This whole period was very intense. They all lived together in the upper room they had rented, although they didn't stay hidden inside for the entire 50 days. Initially, the disciples did stay hidden with the doors locked. But gradually they began to resume some of their normal activities—going fishing, traveling to see other acquaintances. Initially they were frightened when Jesus would suddenly appear, and some of them were doubtful about what was going on. But gradually we begin to see a change in them during this period. They begin to be joyful when Jesus comes to them, rather than afraid. They begin to understand the scriptures in a way they never did before.

So that by the time of the ascension, they are a very different group of people than they were seven weeks ago. And at that point, Jesus tells them that their mission is to bear witness to the relationship they have had with him not just in words but in the way they live their lives. Although he tells them to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come, they are already beginning to function not as a group of disciples without a leader, but as the church. The gospel of Luke says they returned to Jerusalem with great joy. Over the next ten days, we read that they prayed and worshiped in the temple almost non-stop. But they also begin the organizational work needed to carry out this mission Jesus has given them. In fact, while they're waiting for the Holy Spirit, Peter calls the first vestry meeting to elect a successor to Judas.

And then on this day of the first fruits of the harvest, they suddenly experience the Holy Spirit. Oh! This is what he was talking about! And they go out and begin to speak about God in a way that everyone can understand. Peter preaches his first public sermon and they baptize 3000 people. Hence this is one of the preferred days in the church for people to be baptized, second only to Easter.

This transformation that the disciples go through is reflected in the way they perceive God. Initially they and the Jewish people in general during this time, and a lot of people of various faiths today, for that matter, saw God as the father image—remote, loving but stern, powerful and mysterious, rather how my grandfather seemed to me when I was a very little girl. Such a view of God is often accompanied by a rigid insistence on following the rules, lest disaster befall the people.

But Jesus spent much of his ministry redefining the meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures. The image of God that he reflects is not rigid but loving and compassionate and full of life. He is not remote or aloof. Jesus eats and drinks. He goes to weddings and parties and eats with all kinds of “unsavory” people. He weeps over the death of his friend Lazarus. He allows a woman with a scandalous reputation to sob at his feet and then dry them with her hair in the middle of a banquet! He calls his disciples friends.

Jesus’ time living as a human being in Jerusalem and Galilee is very limited. But it serves as a catalyzing event in transforming not just the minds of his disciples, but of the world in general, as to the nature of God and our relationship with God. So Jesus points to the Holy Spirit and a spiritual life in which we experience God as living within us, animating us, one with us. And we, then, become the instruments of transformation, living lives that help to bring into reality, Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God, however we might act that out.

At the end of his time on earth, Jesus sends the disciples out “to do the work they have been given to do.” They weren’t ready when he died. They were still wishing everything would just stay the way it was, forever. But after 50 days of intensely and intimately communing with Jesus, they got it. By the time he ascended, they weren’t clinging to him any more as Mary Magdalene had clung to him in the garden. They were happy and they were ready to step into their own ministry.

Just as Jesus sent the apostles out, now at the end of each service I send you out “rejoicing in the power of the spirit.” It is the same thing as Jesus did with the first disciples. But today we are reversing that model, because today, you are sending me out. Last year when we went to Sierra Leone, it was just me and Trish and Sudy. But now we are going with all of you accompanying us in spirit. With the contributions from the baby shower, we have been able to assemble 100 mama/baby packs with 2 blankets, a diaper and pins, two shirts or onesies, a hat, and socks, plus toiletries for the mother. In addition, you raised \$1,820 for our mission. [Update, after church total has climbed to \$1,945, plus the offering at Easter of \$324, for a grand total of \$2,269!]

For we are called not just to our own personal spiritual journey but to a communal journey. We are a body, as we heard in the reading from I Corinthians. We have different roles, skills, etc., but we are united by the spirit of God. It is through our common life, our

interrelationships that we bring into being the Kingdom of God. And it is a wonderful gift to have the prayers and love of a community behind you.

So let's give thanks today for the wonder of God's spirit, for the church with all its flaws, and for each other and all those with whom our lives intersect. Indeed, let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the spirit. Amen.