

## Day of Pentecost Year A

*Lections: Acts 2:1-21; Ps. 104:25-35,37; 1 Cor. 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23*

What a joy it is to mark the feast of Pentecost with you, where we move from our 50 days of Easter celebrations to our long season of learning what it means to be resurrection people, to live that reality daily, and to act in God's world through the power of the Holy Spirit. Our Pentecost story from Acts is a fulfillment of what Jesus promises the disciples in our reading from John's gospel. It is when God the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Comforter, came to our ancestors from God the Father, just as Jesus, God the Son, said She would.

Pentecost is a rearticulation and a fulfillment of Easter, when Jesus Christ, our Passover lamb delivered the whole world from the bondage of sin and death. 50 days ago, we remembered the liberating, awe-inspiring, and death-defying act of God in the Resurrection. And today, we remember God that reveals Herself every moment as the Spirit of Truth, flowing in us and through us, empowering us to respond to our resurrection by loving Her and by being Good News.

And that is the key word I hope you take from this sermon, beloved friends: power. The Spirit's empowerment is how we can trust in and believe not just the truth of our Pentecost story, but the entire narrative we have retold this Easter season: of Jesus's suffering, death, and most importantly, his resurrection.

I'd like you to think back, if you would, to Holy Week, to re-imagine how the disciples in those stories acted. We remember how convinced they were, after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, that Jesus's messiah-ship meant he would restore the kingdom of Israel by force if he had to. We remember how confused they were when instead of issuing proclamations and raising an army, he knelt down and washed their feet on Maundy Thursday. We remember how terrified they were when he was betrayed and arrested that night. We remember especially how Peter, poor Peter, denied his friend, his rabbi, not once but three times. We remember how none of the male disciples, except maybe John, stayed as he was crucified on Good Friday. We remember their utter shock and disbelief at the news the women brought them that Jesus rose again on Easter, even though he had told them again and again that he would.

We remember all of that about this small group of people, at most 120 souls, because after that first Pentecost, they ended up changing the entire world, changing it so thoroughly that here we are, retelling those stories 2000 years later. How could that happen without the power of the Holy Spirit?

Take Peter. It is clear from the Gospels that he became the leader of the disciples after Jesus's resurrection because he is almost always named first. But the Gospels do not paint him in the most flattering light. First, as a fisherman by trade, Peter is poor, possibly illiterate. Though he loves Jesus deeply, he doesn't always understand him and keeps getting what Jesus is trying to teach wrong. And then, when Jesus needed his friends most when he is tortured and then executed, Peter instead denies, abandons, and hides. Even during the 40 days between the resurrection and ascension, Peter still doesn't totally get it.

But now, on Pentecost, wow, what a different Peter we get. A Peter who does get it, who fully understands who Jesus is and what his teaching, and especially his resurrection means. A Peter who is not hiding in fear but preaching boldly. And while our Acts reading cuts the full story short, later in chapter 2 you would read that 3000 people were added to the first church that day. To go from 120 to 3000? Only Holy Spirit power makes that possible!

And it's not just Peter that gets a spiritual makeover. Also at the end of chapter 2 we get a beautiful summary of what the earliest church, our ancestors in our faith, were like: All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Again, to go from a community marked by grief, poverty, and marginalization, to one that gave and shared so generously, took Holy Spirit power.

And it's not just the scriptural point of view that we can trust at this point. Historians, inside and outside the church, have long debated just how exactly this small group of people, marginalized in almost every kind of way, from a backwater province of a global superpower, outnumbered and under-resourced in a hypercompetitive religious marketplace, where losing didn't mean you that your building got sold but that you could lose your very life—how did Christians go from a group that could easily fit in this sanctuary into a religion of millions in 300 years?<sup>1</sup> Even before Christianity became the state religion of the empire that crucified our savior, there had to have been something about the early church that would draw people to it.

Sure, one sermon can maybe change people's minds. But what changes people's hearts? What makes someone, who might know nothing about Jesus, nor anything about Christians except maybe rumors, or worse, what makes them want to become his disciple? For the first 300 years, the answer was that the Christian church was different than the other religions at the time: where others emphasized law, duty, or tradition, the early church placed a higher value on love. Where others despised slaves and the poor, and looked down on women and children, the early church would give them places of honor, because of love. Where others would avoid the sick, the early church would care for them, even at risk of their own dying, because of love. Where others would hoard food in times of famine or war, the early church would share what it had, because of love. It takes deep love, Christ-like love, Spirit-empowered love, to welcome the stranger, to give self-sacrificially, and to ensure the needs of everyone in the community.

I think you might know where I'm going with this, my friends, as you continue to live throughout this year of change and transition and prepare to welcome another bridge priest, then supply priests, and then hopefully a new Priest-in-Charge. But beyond the internal changes you are experiencing as a parish, our society and our world continue to change. Who will make up the church, both in this beloved community in Newton Corner and in the church with a capital "C" in the years to come? Who will not just be invited, but have their hearts moved to join us?

Despite the incredible beauty, someone won't stay for the building or the music. Despite the prestige, people won't stay for the history. Despite the charisma, people won't even stay for

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wondriumdaily.com/spread-of-christianity-numbers-growth-rate-technique/>

the preacher. But what will make them stay is if they can feel that there is love in this place—self-sacrificial love, mutually giving love, world-changing love.

And that's the Good News, Grace Church! Over the last 4 months I have witnessed firsthand that there is so that kind of love in this place! So much warmth. So much openness. So much curiosity. A lot of opinions and many strongly held, but a desire for mutual understanding that surpasses needing to be right. You have all the ingredients you need to be a strong community for another 150 years and hopefully more! So my prayer is that this Pentecost, the Spirit would empower you to be bold in sharing that love. May you find it within yourselves to open not just your minds and hearts, but also your arms, just a bit wider to embrace this corner of God's beautiful world that needs all the love you can give. Amen.