

## Abundance

Since today is Pentecost Sunday, I felt it necessary to provide a little historical background for what the church universal is celebrating today. First, Pentecost traces its roots to the Festival of Weeks located in the book of Leviticus. The Festival of Weeks is a Jewish feast that celebrates the wheat harvest. It is still observed by most Jewish sects today. So, 50 days (or seven weeks and a day) after the Passover holiday, there was to be a great feast. Like all Jewish holidays, no work was to be done except what was necessary for the people to celebrate. Historically, this festival ended 7 straight weeks of harvest, which was a remarkably joyful time. The word Pentecost comes from the Greek word for 50. Pentecost was the Greek word for the Festival of Weeks.

In addition to celebrating the wheat harvest, this festival also celebrates the day that God gave Moses the Torah, or the Law, the first five books of the Old Testament. During our reading in Acts this morning, it says that the remaining 11 disciples, the newly elected Matthias, Mary, and Jesus' brothers were all in Jerusalem. It is more than likely that they were there to celebrate Pentecost, as were the great crowds that had also assembled in Jerusalem. At the same time, the disciples were still trying to understand all of the events they had just witnessed. At this point in the story, Jesus had been crucified 50 days prior. He rose from the dead 47 days prior. According to tradition, he remained with the disciples for 40 days, which would mean that he had left them a second time just a week ago. They had all been on an emotional rollercoaster, so to speak. Yet the end of Luke says that they responded, not with scorn, disappointment, or confusion at Jesus' departure, but praise. "They returned to Jerusalem with great joy and they were continually in the Temple blessing God."

It was a big couple of months for all of them. According to Acts, the last thing Jesus said to all of them on earth was, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Now remember that Luke and Acts were written by the same author. They use the same vocabulary. They are both examples of classical Greek writing styles. They were meant to be read as one unit. Think of it as a two-volume set. In Luke, Jesus' ministry opens with this statement, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The Spirit was the power of Jesus' ministry. The Spirit of the Lord enabled him to do everything he did. The Spirit of the Lord is God's power manifested within his creation. And Jesus said that the Spirit will come upon us.

We read today what happened. The disciples, Mary, and the brothers were gathered together in one house. It says that a violent wind filled the whole house and a tongue of fire rested on each of them. It's hard to imagine what tongues of fire might look like, but I also believe that it would be difficult to describe in words what actually happened. Nevertheless, the Spirit of God filled each person there, giving them power to do the work of God. All of a sudden, they were witnessing on Jesus' behalf in such a way that each person in the crowd was able to hear his/her own native language. And believe me, this was no small feat for a bunch of Galilean rejects. These were not educated philosophers, but a ragtag bunch of fishermen, shepherds, and tax

collectors. So on this day, God empowered the ordinary to become extraordinary. The power of God flowed through his people and allowed the gospel to spread. So the Christian celebration of Pentecost is really the celebration of God's spirit entering into and enabling the church, the body of Christ, to do the work of Christ. We celebrate this, not because it was a one-time dramatic event, but that the Spirit of God now dwells within each Christian. Paul called our bodies Temples of the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit enables us to do much more of God's work than we ever could on our own. (5:50).

Now let me be clear about one thing. Christianity is not just about a belief. It is not about believing one thing, saying a creed, coming to church. That's not the point of being a Christian. When we become a Christian, when we make the faith our own and accept Christ into our life, our day to day life, the Holy Spirit comes inside of us and becomes a part of us. Part of us is reunited with God in that way, but that reunion has a purpose. We are not to be idle and passive, but active and alive. The task given to us is to participate in God's restoration of his world. And given the sad, sad state of the world right now, that looks like a daunting task. But it is Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, that makes that possible. It is Pentecost that provides us the gifts, the means, and the power to change things.

Some of you may be wondering at this point why I included the reading from John. Let me read it to you: (John 10:7-10) "Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the fullest." Abundant life, right? You know, I've known this verse for many years. We're taught that Jesus offers us abundant life. I've been taught that this phrase means eternal life. Yet now I believe that it means something much more.

This little phrase, "have it to the fullest," is an interpretation of what is in the Greek. Jesus said, I have come that you may have life and that you may have abundance. He leaves the statement open-ended. This is in the same section when Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," which is also rather reminiscent to Psalm 23. It makes me think of a good shepherd leading his flock to the greenest field he can find, while also helping to make them feel content. God offers eternal life to his people. This is true. But more than that, God offers abundance here and now. I don't want a God that only offers me some reward in some unspecified point in the future. I need a God that helps me live now. I need a God that helps me deal with the hurts and the struggles and the worries now. Eternal life is great, but what about this life? What about this world? The good news is that God is offering us abundance. He provides an atmosphere where we can find meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. He provides the means for us to overcome our struggles and to heal our relationships with others. I believe that we were created in order to worship God. I believe that. And I also believe that by striving to bring about God's kingdom of love and peace here on this earth, we find true spiritual fulfillment. Abundance doesn't mean "wealth" or "prosperity," but true spiritual abundance and fulfillment.

At another point in John, Jesus is encouraging his disciples to obey his commandment of love and to bear a lot of fruit. He continues, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." God desires our lives to be a joyful one. Oh, there

will be struggles and there will be suffering. All of the Bible makes that painstakingly clear. But I am talking about real joy. Spiritual fulfillment. God desires this for us. And yet I think that too many of us settle for a lesser reality rather than striving for our dreams. God wants us to be spiritually fulfilled, and if we're not, then there's probably a problem!

Let me share with you a lesson I have recently learned. It's no secret that God desires Christians to act and to be effective in working for God's kingdom. One of the easiest ways to do this is to serve the local church. Help the church meet the spiritual and physical needs of the community around here in order to bring about a kingdom built upon love and peace. It is this work for which we were made. A couple months ago, Sharon did a sermon series on spiritual gifts. This is important because there are certain tasks for which we are gifted. There are certain tasks in God's work in which we excel, and there are certain tasks that bring us spiritual fulfillment. They energize us. They excite us.

All of you probably know that this is my last Sunday at Covenant. Let me be clear about what I am moving towards. Through my experience at this church, I have been able to discern more about where my passions lie. I have noticed the difference between what fills me up and what dries me out. During my last year in seminary, I really hope to discover the areas in which I am gifted. I hope to preach more. I hope to learn how to share my own story with others in such a way that it connects and inspires. I hope to learn if this is something I simply enjoy, or if this is what God has for me. You see, I am learning about what is fulfilling in my life. I am learning how the spirit of God works through me, just as He worked through the disciples on Pentecost. It's a risk to leave this church. My resume won't be as impressive. My future becomes a little more uncertain. But I have come to believe that God desires us to find abundance. I believe that abundance often comes from exercising one's own spiritual gifts in order to bring about God's kingdom. I believe that the more we do that which we are meant to do, the more we find that joy, that fulfillment, and that peace. This may sound a little cliché, "follow your heart," y'know. But really, reflect on your life for a moment. Ask yourself this question, "Do I feel fulfilled?" If not, Why? It may just be that life has got you down. Maybe there's been a recent death, or maybe you've just felt depressed for a season or so. But other times, there's a reason we don't feel fulfilled. We may not be using ANY of the gifts God gave us. We may find ourselves doing mundane tasks, rather than doing what God intended for us. But I'm telling you, God has a place for you. He has plans to give you hope and a future. He has a place of abundance for you and your family. Don't settle for anything less, but take a risk and make a change. Get involved, do something daring, USE YOUR GIFTS, start something new, change a job, but do something in an effort to grow closer to God and to be where He wants you to be. Why would you want to settle for anything less?