

Pentecost Meditation
Acts 2, selected verses
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There are certain days in our lives when everything changes. We go to school for the first time. We graduate and leave home. We decide to get married. There are a handful of times in our lives that are indelibly transforming, when there is no turning back.

Let's take the example of getting married. When I'm counseling with premarital couples I like to say that I'm the only "vendor" they'll meet who cares more about the day after the wedding than the wedding itself. The flowers, the dresses, the invitations, the reception, the music, the guest list ... there are a thousand decisions to be made. And the details matter, almost every beautiful detail matters, because it's such a colossally important day. But *why* is the wedding day important? Only because of what happens the next day, and the next day, and the next. If life *doesn't* change – if the wife keeps "dating" other men, if the husband hides financial problems from his wife, if either one makes major indelible decisions – like moving, for example -- without the other's input and approval, this marriage will be in big trouble. Life fundamentally changes the day that a couple gets married – they're a new family now, with the promises and hope of a lifetime commitment of painstaking love ... and if it doesn't change, the wedding day means nothing.

I want to suggest that this is kind of day that Pentecost is in our own lives. Pentecost is no more just another holiday than a wedding is just another great party. Without what happened next, the day is meaningless. Which is why, unlike most years, we read so much farther in this chapter in Acts than we usually do – to focus not just on the Spirit's gift at Pentecost, but to see as well its aftermath and impact.

Let me start by saying that the day of Pentecost itself is amazing. The Holy Spirit fills the disciples with the power of speech, and everyone is able to hear their message in their native language. The message is powerful too: Peter shares the terrible news that the faithful people of God have missed seeing their own Messiah, and not only missed him, but *crucified* him, even while they did not know it. "But this Jesus God raised up," Peter assures them, and offers them new life even now. They are astonished and amazed as he speaks the truth to them. And they are struck to the heart, seeing for the first time how the corruption of their generation blinded them to the very presence of God.

I think this is one of the details of Pentecost that is the most beautiful. Not that the apostles *speak* in different languages, but that the people *hear* the good news that is given them. This is such a gorgeous thing. To be able to see the immense love God has for us, such undeserved love, adoring love, unreasonable love ... to be able to let down our guard, and see our well-constructed defenses for the tacky veneer they are... to know in our heart of hearts the consequences of our foolish and destructive choices, and the magnitude of the our generation's corrupt and excessive self-absorption ... to know all this and *still* be loved by God. I cannot speak for you, but I know for myself that it is a rare and painful and powerful gift to be able to see my failings with piercing clarity ... and then to be offered wholeness and life by the very God whom I failed. This is what happened that first Pentecost, and it still happens today, every time the Lord gets through to us in the language of our deepest heart ... gets through to us with love and forgiveness and grace.

But the deepest significance of such Pentecost moments lies not in the moments themselves – any more than the deepest meaning of a wedding ends with the wedding day. What happens *after* God's love and forgiveness and grace are revealed marks that revelation's true significance. Indeed, just as a wedding is mocked and empty if nothing changes, so also God's gift of love and the Spirit is mocked if our life doesn't change.

This is exactly what happens to these people who experienced God's love and call to them at Pentecost. Notice how much emphasis is placed on this in Scripture! Beginning the day of Pentecost, and the next day, and the next, their lives were different. These new believers

“devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions ... and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and shared their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

Pentecost is no more a one day event than a wedding is. It is a life-changing event. And I dearly believe that Pentecost-days still happen. There are public moments when we claim God's call on us, when we claim God's love for us, and we commit ourselves to the life of faith again: Whenever a baby is baptized, and the parents and this congregation vow to raise this child in faith ... whenever a young adult is confirmed, and they lay public claim to their faith for the first time ... whenever a new member

joins, and they openly say that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior. These are our public Pentecost moments, our official moments, which doesn't even touch the Pentecost times when we are just going about our everyday business and God gets through to our well-defended hearts and claims us ... the moments we are grabbed by our spiritual lapels and shaken into recognizing our folly and stupidity, the thousand ways we've let ourselves become captive to our own corrupt generation – to the money or the pride or the looks or the control or whatever drug of choice we use to protect our terrible vulnerability. Or the Pentecost times when we're felled by beauty, when God gets through to the deepest places in our hearts by the sheer majesty of the lake at sunrise, the haunting echo of a bird's call in the woods, the heavy scent of wet leaves and new lilacs and mown grass after the rain. Or the Pentecost times when we're knocked over by love, by the squeal of children's voices or the long-suffering patience of a friend, or the deep resonances of a lifetime of habits with the people who know us and love us anyway. Or the Pentecost times here ... when we're sitting here in worship and the gentle mantle of God's love settles over us, in the silence, in the music, in the prayers.

Pentecost still happens. And when it does we're invited to change our lives, not once, but again and again and again, practicing the way of life that Christians have practiced since that first time they felt the Spirit's power on that first Pentecost. Following Jesus doesn't just happen in a moment, any more than a marriage is made when the minister pronounces a couple husband and wife. The Christian life is a series of choices, of habits, of commitments, of hopes, of days and nights strung together that change who we are, that make us the family of God.

I want to close this morning simply with an invitation: that we commit ourselves to the new life we receive in Christ – to commit ourselves to the day after Pentecost just as the first believers did: to consider weekly worship in the church as not an option but a necessity to express our thanks to God. To commit ourselves to learning the Word and to having fellowship with one another – not only for our own faith's sake, but for the sake of those in our church family who are struggling right now. To commit ourselves to letting go of some of our possessions, at least some of our excesses, as long as there are people in God's family who have need. To commit ourselves to look for ways to have our own hearts grow to be glad and generous, not easily bruised but rather full of goodwill, of kindness, of encouragement, of compassion. It's not just for our own benefit that we do these things, although the Lord knows that we need them. It's for the sake of everyone who sees us too – so that day by day it may still be true that the Lord is adding to our number those who are being saved, those who have known the joy of Pentecost, the joy and depth and calling of God's love. Amen.