

Pentecost

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[0 : 0 0] Well, this is a surprise to me as much as to you that I'm here with you this evening. I am very old and I enjoyed preaching for many years and I was thinking that, gee, there wasn't any need for me to preach anymore and I could just kind of sit back and go rotten.

But I'm pleased to have this opportunity and I'm very pleased that my wife Janet is here. Janet, would you wave or stand up or do something? She's an English girl that I picked up in Iran a few years ago.

She and I have known you all, at least indirectly. We knew about Rez when it was just getting started and we have watched with great interest and joy to see Advent come into being and to bifurcate as well.

That's super. And we have a special sympathy and interest in you all because your congregations are very much like the congregation that we served in Tehran for seven years.

We led the English-speaking congregation, which was made up of young professionals who were most of them on two-year contracts.

[1 : 2 2] So we lost half the congregation every year. But there were always new people coming in and they were lots of fun. Many of them were grown-up Christians.

And so it was just like a wonderful puzzle to put together the talent that was appearing on the floor, so to speak, every year. And to see God bless this very transient, mobile, gifted congregation.

So we feel at home amongst you all. And we both celebrate and express our sympathy for you all. Many of you who are only here in Washington for a few years and can't hang out for an indefinite period.

So we're very glad to be here. And we'll try to share with you some of the, well, what the Lord's been saying to us in recent years.

Would you pray with me? Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Oh, Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

[2 : 3 1] Amen. Amen. Well, today is the Feast of Pentecost. And I think you are being very well instructed in these things.

Pentecost is the culmination of the great 50 days. Hence the word Pentecost, which means 50. The great 50 days of Easter. The secular world gets all mixed up.

They think that Easter is just one day that happened, what, seven weeks ago or so. But the Christian community knows that Easter is the great festival of the church's year.

And it lasts for 50 years, 50 years, 50 days. I think I was talking about the Jubilee or something like that. The great 50 days.

And it's the celebration of God raising Jesus from the dead. And that has so much meaning that it's certainly not enough to have just one day to celebrate the event.

[3 : 35] And, of course, you also know that every Sunday is Easter. You knew that, too, didn't you? That we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus every Sunday. The readings for today are wonderful.

But the reading from Acts chapter 2, I think, is especially troubling for some of us. Perhaps you have all come from very mature, pious Christian backgrounds.

But for those of us who have come from secular backgrounds or agnostic or even atheistic households. As we hear Acts chapter 2, we either tend to dismiss it as being just this is just wild language.

Who could take this seriously? Or if we do take it seriously, those of us from a more ordinary background such as Presbyterian, which is my background, it's kind of scary.

Also, if you have read history, you know what troublemakers that Pentecostals are. They have no respect for worldly authority.

[4 : 50] And they usually turn into revolutionaries and end up in prison or in the hangman's noose. So this Pentecostalism stuff is dangerous, to say the very least.

Anyway, who wants a huge wind blowing through church or flames of fire appearing in the midst of the congregation? It would be reasonable to be kind of afraid of this Pentecostal phenomenon.

And should we be bothering with it or much less celebrating it on a day like today? So I want to share with you three points.

I mean, this is a sermon, isn't it? So I want to say, first of all, I want to talk briefly about don't be afraid of the Holy Spirit. And secondly, we who follow Jesus need to know how to cooperate with Holy Spirit.

And then thirdly, I want to share with you a best kept secret. In fact, most preachers don't talk about it at all. And there are reasons for that. So these are the three things I'd like to share with you briefly today.

[5 : 57] First of all, don't be afraid of the Holy Spirit. Could I embarrass you by asking how many of you come from a Pentecostal background after all?

You see, you have some of these wild revolutionaries in your midst. And they're not troubled at all about these things like manifestations of the Holy Spirit or speaking in tongues.

In fact, some of them may come from churches that think that if you don't speak in tongues, you're not the real McCoy. But we won't go there. In the 1970s, and most of you weren't even born then, were you?

There was a movement called the Charismatic Movement across large parts of the church. And here in Washington, from time to time, different congregations would kind of light up with the manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

And there were people who would go wherever the action was. And we, those of us who had been Presbyterians, for example, we used to refer to them with some disdain as Beltway Charismatics.

[7 : 14] Because they wanted to have the experience. Experience is important, but it's not the main thing.

And for those of us who may come from kind of a stiff shirt, straight-laced, skeptical, or however you want to describe us poor things, who are uneasy about spiritual experience, what I want to say is, cool it.

Don't worry about it. The Holy Spirit is a gentleman. He's very gentle. He does not force himself on anyone. And unless people invite him and are waiting on him and ask him to come, he usually doesn't show up and scare people to death.

But he is very much present and at work. And so it's really important for us to learn how to cooperate with him.

And I'm getting ahead of myself. I wanted just to touch on one other thing. And that is that our Pentecostal charismatic friends will tell you that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are really important and that we are all to expect to receive them and use them.

[8 : 39] And I'll get back to that in a minute. But this is why I want to say don't be afraid of the Holy Spirit. He's very gentle.

He doesn't usually turn up with fireworks unless he's invited. In other words, he's at work quietly and patiently among us all the time.

And he just wants our cooperation. So don't be afraid of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, how do we cooperate with the Holy Spirit? If he's so gentle most of the time and so quiet, it seems to me that most people just ignore him.

And certainly those of us who are followers of Jesus shouldn't be in that camp. We should be really paying attention to the Holy Spirit.

After all, on the evening of the first day of the resurrection, you remember, Jesus appeared in the midst of his disciples and he said, My peace be with you.

[9 : 41] And he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you remit, they are remitted. And whose sins you retain, they are retained.

And as the Father has sent me, so I send you. So there's an essential connection between the fact that God sent Jesus into the world to do his work and Jesus sends us into the world.

And the only way that we can be of any use at all is if we are cooperating any use at all to God is by cooperating with the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Truth, which is a really shocking thing to say in Washington, D.C., especially during the election season.

Nobody believes there is any such thing as truth. Certainly not in the political process. And our culture tends to think that all truth is relative anyway. Your truth is yours and mine is mine.

And whether they connect or not doesn't make any difference. And that's a lot of baloney. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth.

[11 : 07] What does he do? What's the connection between Spirit and Truth? Well, the first thing is suggested by today's gospel.

Philip, one of the Greek-speaking disciples, comes to Jesus and says, Lord, show us the Father.

And Jesus says to him, have you been with me all this time, Philip? And you do not realize that if you have seen me, you have seen the Father.

The primary, the first job that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth does, is to enable us to recognize God in Jesus.

That the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Yahweh, the God of Israel, Emmanuel, comes among us in the human life of this peasant from Galilee.

[12 : 07] It's the Holy Spirit that enables us to say, yeah, that makes sense to me. I got it. That's terrific. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

I think as Peter said, nobody can say, or is it Paul? No one can say Jesus is Lord apart from the Holy Spirit. So that's the first thing and the most basic and important thing that the Spirit of Truth does.

The second thing that he does is he leads us into all truth. One of the most touching things I think that Jesus said to his disciples when he was about to leave them was said, I have so much to say to you now, but you cannot bear it all right now.

And I think that's true of all of us. A lot of you are raising little kids, and you know you have to speak their language, and there's only so much that they can understand at one time.

And over the years, they gradually are able to understand more and more. And by the time they get past adolescence, they realize that you're not as stupid as they thought you were.

[13 : 17] But there is a process of being able to apprehend the truth. So it is the Holy Spirit all through our lives, all through the maturation process, that enables us to recognize truth.

And this is really important because the truth that we're talking about is our worldview, our perception of reality, and not having a realistic, true worldview is the definition, I think, of mental illness.

And that's where an awful lot of our fellow human beings are. More, well, I shouldn't say more important, just as important.

Third thing that the Holy Spirit does is enables us to speak the truth in love. Now, our culture, well, I come from suburban Chicago, and we were all taught to be polite and to not get into any kind of conflict.

I was told, at least at the dinner table, never to talk about religion, politics, sex, or money. So, you know, what use is there to talk about anything at all? But the main thing was to avoid conflict.

[14 : 44] And there are some congregations that function as though table manners were the absolute top priority norms, and that you have to avoid conflict at all costs.

And I know some clergy, basically, who have gotten fired from congregations because they were not able to suppress or avoid conflict in the life of the congregation.

I have the audacity of believing, for example, that the job of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. But the comfortable...

The comfortable do not like to be afflicted. And if they think you're paying your salary to keep them comfy, you're in trouble, gentlemen.

But we have been given the spirit of truth, and if we're paying attention to him, he will enable us to speak the truth in love.

[15 : 54] And this is a skill, of course, that all married couples desperately need to learn. We need to be able to speak truth to one another, but not in order to win or assert dominance over the other, but in order to establish relationship.

And, of course, this isn't just in the family. The definition of sin that I find most useful is sin is broken relationship. Sin is not, first of all, bad morality.

It is, first of all, broken relationship. And we've all been there, done that, and struggled with it all the time. Truth speaking in love enables the creation of healthy relationships.

It enables us to live together, which is kind of basic. And this is why, by the way, of course, I think it's wonderful that Advent and res and such congregations have core groups or house groups or small groups, whatever you want to call them, because I think this is where the action is, by the way.

And if you want to have or recognize the work of the Holy Spirit from day to day, make sure you're participating in a small group. Where people are learning to speak the truth in love.

[17 : 21] You can usually tell. A group has to be meeting regularly enough over a long enough period of time that not only do you get to know each other, but you begin to annoy each other.

If you know someone well enough to be really irritated by them from time to time, then you can sense that this is a real relationship. And the Holy Spirit makes this possible.

And, of course, one of the other characteristics of this kind of authentic community is laughter. If you really feel accepted as you are, you will often find that your time together is characterized by laughter.

One of the texts in the New Testament says the Lord loves a cheerful giver.

Well, actually, the Greek root word is the same root for the word hilarious. And I think that's much better. The Lord loves a hilarious giver.

[18 : 28] And he wants us to enjoy laughing together. And this is one of the characteristics of relationships where people know that they are accepted as they are.

And they can enjoy each other. They can laugh at themselves. And they can find amusement together just quite spontaneously.

Finally, cooperating with the Holy Spirit. And finally, he says, I wasn't told to watch the clock. And I'm trying to be responsible here. There's so much to know and learn and share about the Holy Spirit.

But the critical thing is listening. And it's really strange. In Hebrew, the word that says, that's translated listen. Listen this day to what the Lord is saying.

It also means obey. So in English, we have to use both words. Listen and obey. Listen for the nudges of the Holy Spirit. And do what has been gently suggested.

[19 : 36] Now, that sounds like a very dangerous thing to do. I mean, how do you know that the voices that you hear within yourself are Holy Spirit and not some other presence? And this is where we need each other.

And we need to know the scriptures. We need to know, most of all, of course, our Lord. And recognize whatever kind of activity is consistent with who he is. But if we do that, we will find that the Spirit is wanting to talk to us all the time.

And he nudges us. He gives us ideas, which may seem strange or irrelevant. I hadn't thought of that before. Sometimes he gives us dreams.

But one way or another, he very gently speaks to us. And when we have a sense that this may be the Spirit speaking to us, then we should act on it. And if it is the Spirit, one of the proofs is that doors open, to use that very familiar metaphor.

Things fall into place. Things happen. And, for example, if you've got the feeling that you should pick up a phone or send an email to Jack. And you pick up the phone and you call him and he says, oh, I was just thinking of you.

[20 : 50] Or I'm so pleased to hear from you. Or, as a matter of fact, I've just been facing the most terrible situation. You get this kind of resonance that confirms the fact that the little voice that you heard, in fact, was Holy Spirit.

Okay. That's one and two. Don't be afraid of the Holy Spirit. And by all means, listen and obey. Cooperate with Holy Spirit. Finally, and this is very brief, but it's huge.

It's what I consider to be a best kept secret. And I think it may be a secret because so many of us old mainline clergy, anyway, are scared to death of the book of Revelation.

Or Revelations, as it is incorrectly called. But some of our Christian friends read it as though somehow this was telling the future or could be in any way.

That could, should be, you're probably all too young to remember the Left Behind series of books and movies. But this is what happens with one kind of reading of the book of Revelation.

[22 : 09] And I think because codependent mainstream clergy tend to be afraid of stirring the pots, as it were, they have stayed away from this whole subject about last things.

Eschatology. Oh, yes. But this is so important, and this is so exciting, and it's so liberating. The experience, and this is where I think this experience is so important.

The experience of Holy Spirit in community. I've hyphenated that in my notes. The experience of Holy Spirit in community, and that's where he turns up mainly, is a foretaste of the new creation, of the age to come.

It is an experience of the future that God has planned for all his children beyond the grave.

A new world. A new age. A new creation. This creation brought to his fulfillment, not thrown away.

[23 : 22] This world and our life in it here is not junk. It's not going to be just thrown in the ash heap. But it's going to be taken up into this new reality.

The new creation. The age to come. And why is this important? This is important because this is our destination. Here we have no lasting city, but we look for a city not made with human hands.

And the new Jerusalem, we won't build it here ourselves. It will come down out of heaven to earth. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, that thy will be done on earth as in heaven.

And what we are praying for is the transformation of the present creation into something new and wonderful, but in continuity with this world and this life.

And what this means is that what you achieve here, what struggles and sacrifices you go through here, are not wasted. They're part of your preparation for the new creation.

[24 : 28] And we as community are commissioned by God through Jesus. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. We are commissioned to be places in the historical process where other people can catch a glimpse of the future that God intends for all of us.

That's our job, our function as the people of God. We don't have to do it all ourselves. We don't have to fix all by ourselves this messed up world.

And that should be a great relief, especially to you type A personalities. That doesn't mean for those of us who are type D personalities that we sit back and do nothing.

But it means that whatever we do is worthwhile. And what counts is that the presence of the Holy Spirit is manifest in our relationships in such a way that other people can hear the good news of the kingdom of God and can experience, can feel what it means to be loved unconditionally by the creator of the universe.

All of this is anticipated. All of this, what I've been trying to say this evening, is anticipated in what God has done by raising Jesus from the dead.

[25 : 53] All of this is implicit in the meaning of his resurrection. And so we gladly say, Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!