

Empowered by the Spirit

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on Whitsunday, the Day of Pentecost, May 24, 2015.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Acts 2:1-2

Pentecost is about empowering the people of the God with the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit. The small band of disciples was first brought together by their common experience with Christ. They were sustained by being empowered and commissioned by the Holy Spirit to live out the gospel as the church in the world.

The Apostles were inspired as they breathed in the power of God's Holy Spirit. Pentecost is about power, wind, and air. Pneuma is the Greek for air, from which we get words such as pneumonia and pneumatic. Ruach is the Hebrew for wind that unseen force whose effects are seen. What lay ahead for them was sharing the good news of forgiveness and reconciliation for all.

Pentecost comes from Pentekosto, which means fifty. Though some scholars believe that the resurrection and Pentecost experiences may have occurred at the same time, the church has traditionally observed the descent of the Spirit upon the apostles fifty days after Easter. As with other Christian festivals, the origins of Pentecost grew out of a Jewish festival of the Feast of Weeks held fifty days after the Passover. It was in observance of the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai and to offer thanks to God for the first harvest of wheat and barley.

The least understood phenomenon that occurred at Pentecost was the mysterious speaking in tongues by the disciples. This spiritual phenomenon known as glossolalia was probably not foreign languages, as Luke seems to have thought, but unintelligible sounds resulting from an ecstatic experience with the Spirit of God speaking powerfully from within.

What came out of the Pentecost experience was the empowering of the apostles to go forth and proclaim the good news of our salvation with compassion, mercy and forgiveness. Our salvation is when we fall flat on our face and recover from the stupid, senseless mistakes we make. Salvation happens when the forces of evil no longer have any power over us. It happens when we refuse to be dominated by sin. We come by salvation of our own free will. No one forces us into it like a straight jacket.

The church grew out of the experience of those twelve who were committed to taking the gospel to the whole world. The mission of the church is like a business in that it requires determination with the right plan carried through with an entrepreneurial spirit. The disciples' initial investment was nothing less than the power of God's most Holy Spirit acting in and through them to inspire them to take the gospel to every corner of the world.

Before they set out to convert the world, they each had to be converted from within. Personal conversion is necessary to be part of the church's mission. We don't always know when we are going to experience those times when we are infused with the power and presence of God's Holy Spirit. Those holy moments of God's action in our lives have a way of happening when we least expect it. Because they are of God, they can't be contrived or planned, but are spontaneous and unplanned. All of us are empowered with gifts to offer for the common good. It is up to us to discover and learn how to make the best use of our gifts.

It is said that the church is not a club for saints but a hospital for sinners. At the same time we can't be a nursing home for bullies and whiners acting out their personal problems. I don't have to tell you that there are some desperately lonely and needy people in this world. God loves them all and it is not up to us to exclude anyone but at the same time those who are chronically negative, rude and toxic cripple the life of the church. Pathologically disturbed people acting out cause division and disruption. They sap the energy needed to be effective in our mission. In our closing hymn today the church is seen with a "scornful wonder" sorely oppressed by unbelief and divisiveness that threaten our common life. We must be a model for what a Christian community needs to be by our selfless giving and mutual support.

Pentecost is about our being on fire with the Spirit of God who cleanses our hearts with love, burning away every unhealthy thing and cleansing the interior of our soul of every infirmity. The Spirit leaves no room for enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissension, factions, and envy. The fullness of the indwelling Spirit of God brings forth in us the fruits of the Spirit that are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Today we bring into full membership in the church Maeve and Gioia Jackson-Scrima. We pray that they will know the joy of inner peace and harmony of being in Christ. At every baptism we renew our own vows of membership in Christ's church. Every time we say that we believe in the Holy Spirit, we are saying that we believe that there is a living God who dwells in our interior life guiding us to pattern our lives after Christ. As the people of God, we celebrate our oneness in Christ by using our gifts of the Spirit to be instruments of God's power and presence wherever we are.

That is our mission and we have work to do.