



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, June 4, 2017.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 1 Corinthians 12:4-6

Pentecost is about empowering the people of the God to do the work of ministry through the action of the Holy Spirit. The apostles were empowered and commissioned to go tell the world about the Good News of God's forgiveness and reconciliation. This day is also called Whitsunday because of the custom of clothing the newly baptized in white.

Pentecost comes from *pentekosto*, which means fifty. Though some scholars believe that the resurrection and Pentecost events may have occurred at the same time, the church traditionally observes the celebration of this Day of Pentecost fifty days after Easter. The origins of Pentecost grew out of the Jewish festival of the Feast of Weeks that was held fifty days after Passover in observance of the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. It was also a time to give thanks for the first harvest of wheat and barley.

The emphasis of this day is on the power of the Holy Spirit through the natural elements of wind and fire. At Pentecost, the apostles were inspired, they breathed in the mighty power of God's Spirit. For me, I am inspired when I walked along the seashore and breath in the fresh ocean air. The inspiration of the apostles reached their total inner being and they were never again the same. Each of them was given gifts of the Spirit that include wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, the working of miracles, and prophesy, the ability to discern God's will for us.

One of the least understood phenomena of the gifts of the Pentecost experience is speaking in tongues, known as glossolalia. These were probably not foreign languages but ecstatic utterances and unintelligible sounds interpreted as the spirit of God speaking powerfully from within. This spiritual phenomenon once associated with the fundamentalist churches has been experienced in mainline churches as well. Saint Paul is cautious about using this spiritual gift only when there is an interpreter. He insists that it is better to speak in a language understood by the people.

What came out of the Pentecost experience was that the apostles were empowered to go forth into all the world to preach the reconciling power of God's love for us. For them and the generations that followed it was all about how God's kingdom and realm is in and among us. When you hear people talk about being saved, it is about being saved from the power of sin and alienation. Being saved is when the forces of evil no longer have any dominion over us. It means that we are no longer have to suffer the guilt of our stupid, senseless mistakes. We come to it by our own free will. No one will clamp it on us like a set of handcuffs. We come to Christ on our own. No one can do it for us. It is about growing closer to the life and person of Jesus Christ in every way.

To be part of the mission of the church requires the right attitude. Before they set out to convert the whole world, the apostles had to be converted from within. Saint Paul describes the church as the body of Christ. Just as we are one body with many moving parts, so it is with Christ. We were all baptized into one body and we are made to be of one spirit in Christ. Personal conversion authenticates our being part of the body of Christ.

The gifts we have been given are not confined for our own exclusive use, but are to be used for the common good. It is up to each of us to discern what gifts we have and how best to use them. It is said that the church is a hospital for sinners and not a club for saints. At the same time, we are not a nursing home for chronically negative attitudes that suck the life out of our mission and purpose. The great threat to church's mission is not only by disruptive and crippling forces but also by indifference to our calling. Our empowerment as Christians is to grow into being better people. Working together, we bring out the best in what the church can be.

Pentecost is about the very Spirit of God cleansing our heart and soul. The fire of the Holy Spirit cleanses our soul of every infirmity, leaving no room for enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissension, factions or envy. The church is fertile ground for the indwelling power of God to produce the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

This morning we gather to complete our strategic plan for the next five years. This has been a project in which all of us have taken part. Your faithful participation in this project is a testament to your solidarity and determination to keep our parish on track. When I reflect back on the Episcopal Church in which I grew up and in which I was first ordained, there has been dissension and division contributing to the diminution of our unity and effectiveness. In our final hymn today, The church's one foundation, we sing, *Though with a scornful wonder (we) see her sore oppressed by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed.* We must strive to break down the barriers that divide and separate us.

I believe that our parish of Emmanuel Church is a model for the wider church to remain strong and steadfast in unity of spirit and steadfastness of purpose. We have great potential for being a source for good in the world and I pray that we continue to remain true to the mission that God has given us.