

Sermon June 8, 2014 Day of Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23

Like so many Christian festivals, our feast of Pentecost has its roots in a much older tradition belonging to a different religion, in this case Judaism. In Jewish tradition, Pentecost, now called by its Hebrew name “Shavuot,” celebrates a defining moment for the Jewish people. According to the Talmud, the giving of the law on Mount Sinai is thought to have taken place fifty days after the Passover, the escape of the people from slavery in Egypt under Pharaoh. The Egyptian people were stricken by a series of plagues and in their weakened condition, the Hebrew people were able to make their escape. On the night of the tenth plague, the children of Israel were to mark their doorposts with the blood of a sacrificial spring lamb. In that way, the Angel of the Lord would know to ‘pass over’ their houses, striking only the first-born of Egypt. On that night, the Israelites got up, and with their sandals already on their feet, ate a hasty meal of roast lamb and unleavened bread and then fled across the Red Sea to freedom in the desert beyond.

Fifty days *after that*, on the misty mountain top of Sinai, as the Book of Exodus records, Moses heard the sound of the trumpet

and the voice of God in the thunder and received the law in the form of ten commandments written on two stone tablets.

This is the event celebrated by Jews at “Pentecost,” meaning fifty days. Seven weeks of seven days (‘a week of weeks’ as it were) culminated in the giving of the law on the fiftieth day, so its Hebrew name is Shavuot: ‘the festival of weeks.’ It is also a harvest festival in which the first fruits are offered to God in gratitude for all His goodness. Very likely new wine was also offered, hence the reference to it in the Pentecost story we read from Acts this morning.

These stories of the Exodus and the time in the desert are rich in history and in meaning. I find that every time I come back to them I treasure them more and more for their tremendous spiritual value. I am sure this was true also for the first Christians, many of whom were Jews by birth and raised in families faithful to that tradition. They continued to draw on this history, as we do, to find meaning and to reflect upon their own experiences. As a result, many of the defining moments of Christianity are celebrated ‘in parallel,’ as it were, to Jewish feasts and celebrations. The great events of Easter are celebrated as our difficult and dangerous

flight into freedom, very much in parallel to Passover and The Exodus.

Fifty days later, we celebrate not so much Pentecost itself, as much as the event that took place for Christians on that day. Followers of Jesus were gathered in Jerusalem from every corner of the known world because the Jewish festival called them together. They were strangers to one another. They lived in different lands, spoke different languages, and were steeped in different cultures. As the Book of Acts tells us they were “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.” In many cases there was a history of significant conflict between them, as is attested by the presence of Egyptians among the company, to take but one example.

In short, they had every reason not to get along and not to understand each. Every barrier of language, culture, and history seems to have been present. In addition, these first Christians were in a situation of apparently insurmountable persecution and loss. Their founder had been put to death in a public execution of

profound cruelty. It should have been a lesson to them. It should have brought their little movement to an end. They '*should have*' realized that all was lost. Few in number as they were, they might have done the obvious thing and seen that they had no chance of continuing, given that they were immersed and surrounded by much more numerous Jews and Roman pagans. But in His exodus from a land of oppression and the threat of death, Our Lord had planned something much better for His people in the land of the living.

The miracle that took place at pentecost is that people who could not possibly understand each other, and who in fact had every reason not to, found a way to do just that. The way they found was Jesus Christ. In gathering around One who had already forgiven the wrongs done to Him before they happened they found One who could be their common example, their mutual forgiveness, and their unifying liberator. He turned out to be the way, the truth, and the life. In a sense He was their new Moses, their new Elijah, and their new Lord. His new commandment to these first Christians, and to us, is that we love one another as He has loved us, that is with absolute forgiveness and faith.

This coming together in Jesus Christ of people who cannot possibly understand one another is, in a sense, the deepest purpose of the church. This is the uniqueness of Christianity and why the gospel has been able spread throughout the world, to people of every language, race, and nation. It is not about culture, language, ideology, history, or geography. The Church is not about being *against* something — although Christians have often, throughout history, made the mistake of thinking it is. It is not about claiming power. It is about giving all of that up to discover in God, through Jesus Christ, our relatedness with everyone around us and all of humanity. That we all come forward to drink from communion cup is the spiritual practice by which we remind ourselves of this once a week or more, and seek to make it a habit of our hearts.

In characteristic fashion, St. Paul puts it very nicely in his First Letter to the Corinthians:

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body-- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free-- and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”