

"What Difference Does Pentecost Make?"

Dear Friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus.

A number of years ago, in one the biggest auto races in the country, an event took place that was hard to believe. The year was 1985. It was the Daytona 500. The race had just begun. The drivers were just beginning the third lap, when all of a sudden the car, driven by Donny Allison, rolled to a stop on the infield side of the track. When it was checked, what they found was that no one had filled it with gas.

Now, can you imagine the embarrassment? During one of the most important races of the year, one of the top drivers in auto racing stalled because he had run out of gas. Hard to believe it could happen. Such a routine part in the preparations, but no one remembered to fill the tank. No one remembered to check the fuel that played such an important part in the race.

Well, unfortunately, that's where far too many individuals are in the world today when it comes to their spiritual life. They're trying to drive and live the Christian life on an empty tank. But it's simply not possible. As hard as we might try, if our spiritual tank is not filled on a regular basis with what it needs, there's no way we can successfully complete the race. The Bible says, "Not by might nor by power, but by God's Spirit."

Today we celebrate the Day of Pentecost. A day long ago when God sent His Holy Spirit to be with those first disciples, and to empower them to become apostles, and to thereby give birth to what we know today as the Christian Church. One of the three great festivals of the Church year, (unlike Christmas and Easter), Pentecost is often a forgotten day in the eyes of the world, celebrating the most often forgotten person of the Trinity.

In fact, even in the Church, of the three persons of God, (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), most people could say a good amount about God as Father, as well as about the part Jesus played as God's Son. But many would be hard-pressed to say a lot about the Holy Spirit, and about the work the Spirit does in the world today.

And so that's what we're going to be talking about today – about the Holy Spirit and about the work of the Holy Spirit in us. And we're going to be doing so by asking two simple questions relating to Pentecost. #1 (Pentecost): "What's it all about?" And, #2: "What difference does it make?" "What's it all about?" And, "What difference does it make?"

Now, you'll find outlines in your bulletins, if you'd like to follow along. First, "What's it all about?" (It's about many things.) I've listed three on your outlines. Number one, Pentecost is about God keeping His promises to His people. It's about God keeping His promises to His people.

Remember how it all played out? Just before Jesus went back into heaven, He reminded His disciples of the promise God had made. He said, "This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead...and repentance and forgiveness will be preached in His name...And you are witnesses of these things," He said, "And I am going to send you what my Father has promised." (Long before it happened, God made a promise)

Paul says the same thing (in his letter to Titus). He says, "...a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of God's elect – a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time."

Now, let me ask you a question. Anybody here today ever broken a promise? Anyone here today ever had one broken made to you? Our world is filled with broken promises, with words failing to be backed up with deeds. Pentecost is God's reminder that His word of promise will always be true.

That's what was happening on that first Pentecost. God was sending His Holy Spirit, just as He had promised. And He was filling those disciples with a power He had promised to give. (Remember the story?) Tongues of fire, the rush of a violent wind; outward signs, to be sure, of the coming of the Holy Spirit, but they were the fulfillment, as well, of a promise God had made to change His people from within. (That's what was happening.) Fear-filled disciples became faith-filled apostles. Trembling and timid watchers of the events became tireless and transformed witnesses of what they had seen. God was keeping His promise. And in the process, He was changing the world.

“What's it all about?” Number one, it's about God keeping His promises to His people. Number two, Pentecost is about God speaking in a language we can understand. It's about God speaking in a language we can understand.

Now, let me ask you another question. Have you ever had a conversation with someone, and after they were done talking, you weren't any more sure about what they said, than before they said it? (Maybe that happens for some of you on Sunday mornings. I hope it's not happening right now.) Well, it didn't happen that way on Pentecost.

Again, from Acts chapter two: Luke tells us, “When they heard the sound of the wind, the crowd came together...because each one heard them speaking in his own language.”

Now, (this is a bit of an aside) and I fully understand the connection between speaking in tongues and the Day of Pentecost. (It's one of the gifts of the Spirit, and it's a language only a few can understand.) But that's not what was happening on that day. On that day, only a few were speaking, but it says that everyone understood. No matter where they came from, what language they spoke, there wasn't one who couldn't understand. And it says, as a result, thousands of people came to know Jesus on that single day. Pentecost is about God speaking in a language we can understand.

And number three, Pentecost is about God using His people to reach people. It's about God using His people to reach people. (That was the message we heard last week.) On the day of His ascension, Jesus told His followers to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Spirit to come. And He said, “When the Holy Spirit comes,” He said, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

And that's exactly what happened, beginning that very day. The message of God's saving work in Christ began to spread. First it was through Peter and some of the other apostles. Then it was through Paul and Barnabas and Silas. And before not too long, the message of Jesus had made its way all the way to Rome. God was using people to reach people.

Now, that's what it's all about. It's about God keeping His promises to His people, about God speaking in a language we can understand, and about God using His people to reach people.

Let's change directions for a moment and talk about the difference Pentecost can make for us. (And, again, I've listed three things on your outline.) “What difference does it make?” Because God keeps His promises, because God speaks in a language we can understand, and because God uses people to reach people, number one: I can be confident in my calling. I can be confident in my calling.

Paul tells us, in his letter to the church in Rome, that “through Jesus...we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the nations...and you also,” he says, “are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.” And then, later on in that same letter, he tells us “for God's gifts and His call are irrevocable.”

Now, you tell me, my friends. But how many things can you say that about in your life, that no matter what, what's true today will also be true tomorrow? Can you say it about your job? About your friends? About your finances? About your health?

Two things are certain, right: death and taxes? Let me give you a third: the call of God in your life. (I hope you know that.) You are a child of God. You belong to Him. And there's nothing that can ever change that fact. No matter what, that calling in your life will never change. And not only that, but God has called you for a reason. He has something in your life that only you can do.

Now, you say, “But I'm not a preacher or I'm not a teacher. What's God going to do with me?” I don't know what God's going to do with you. (That's up to God.) But He's called you to be His child. And He's given you certain talents and abilities. And what He wants is for you to use what you've been given.

A couple of weeks ago, I caught a bit of the Country Music Awards on television. (It seems like everyone has their own version.) Sports has its MVP's. Movies have the Oscars. And then there are the Emmy's, and the Grammy's, and the Golden Globe Awards. Why not in the church? (Have you ever thought about that? Maybe we've said this before?) Every year we could have an MVCM award: “Most Valuable Church Member.” And then we could have a “top male singer” award, and a “leading female usher” award, and a “best supporting role as a reader of the Sunday morning texts.”

Why not in the church? Why not? I'll tell you why not. Because we're all important. Because there's not one of us here this morning more important than the next. Because we've all been called. (You've all been called.)

And you've all been chosen. And you've all been empowered by the Holy Spirit to do a work only you can do.

Paul says, "Do you not know that the Spirit of God lives in you?" John says, "By this we know that God abides in us, by the Spirit which He has given us."

My friends, don't ever think that your calling doesn't matter. It does. And don't ever think that what you have to offer isn't important. It is. ("What difference does it make?") Number one: I can be confident in my calling.

Number two: I can be courageous in my witness. I can be courageous in my witness. Now, we had a group of people who went out yesterday morning and passed out invitations to the church. (There were about 15 of us who walked up and down some of the neighboring streets.) And it was a good experience. It was a simple way to share the message - a non-threatening way to witness to our faith. (The group came back and was enthusiastic about what took place.) And we're going to be doing it again. I'd strongly encourage you to come and join in the effort when it happens.

But let me ask you. Have you ever been afraid to talk about Jesus? Have you ever felt a fear about mentioning the name of Christ? If you have, you're not alone. It's one of the main reasons people give for not talking about their faith. But let me tell you something. If you're a follower of Jesus, then you're a witness. You witness to your faith every day. The only question is, "What kind of witness are you?"

It's the old "If someone you loved was drowning in a lake, would you swim out and help them? If one of your friends at work or at school was dying from some disease and you had the cure, would you keep it to yourself?"

Now, maybe that's not fair. (We're not called to save the world. Only Jesus can change a person's heart.) But there's a world of hurt happening in people's lives apart from Christ. And you and I have the answer. You and I have the cure. And His name is Jesus. And He went to the cross to pay the price for our sin. And He's alive. And so is His Spirit. And He has called us to be His witnesses.

In fact, did you know that the word "passion" comes from the same word as "compassion?" (It's true.) And the connection, when it comes to our witness, is significant. Because when you have passion for your witness, you show compassion to those with whom you share. When you have passion for your witness, you are being compassionate to the world.

Paul says, "Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, and be strong." Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

My friends, if there's someone you care about who doesn't know Jesus, then the most compassionate thing you can do is to become courageous in your witness. (How many times did Jesus reach out in compassion to the people, because He cared about their lives?) And you can do it, too. (And how come?) Because you're not on your own. That's what Pentecost is all about.

One writer has said that "before God sent the Church into the world, God sent His Holy Spirit into the church." (And it's true.) You're not alone. Neither am I. Because God has given us His Holy Spirit, promising to be with us in everything we do.

Jesus told His disciples, "Do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit." Number two: because of what happened on Pentecost, I can be courageous in my witness.

And number three, because of what happened on Pentecost, I can be certain of my salvation. I can be certain of my salvation.

Last weekend our 8th grade confirmation class went on a retreat at Mount Cross. Next Sunday afternoon the class of 18 young people will be confirming their faith in the living God. One of the memory work assignments they were given was to memorize the Apostles' Creed and Martin Luther's explanation to each of the three articles.

Now, I don't know how many of you would have memorized the explanation to the Third Article, (the one dealing with the Holy Spirit), but listen as I read what Luther says. (And, again, he's talking about the work of the Holy Spirit.)

He says, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and keeps

me in the one true faith.” He goes on to say that “in the Christian Church, day after day, He fully forgives my sins and the sins of all believers. And on the last day He will raise me and all the dead and give me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.”

Now, how can he say that? He can say that because that's what God has said to us. That's what God is saying to you this morning. He's saying, “Your sins are forgiven.” He's saying, “There's a home waiting for you when you die.” And He's saying, “You can believe it and you can trust it, because God has promised it to you in His Son.”

Let me close today by simply reading a few passages that speak of the promise God has given us in Jesus, and of the certainty we can have of our salvation through the power of the Holy Spirit. Listen as I read.

From the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, God says, “I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live.” From the book of Romans: “If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies.” From Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth: “He has set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” And from the book of Acts, (the passage we read today), “And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

What difference does Pentecost make? Because God keeps His promises, because God speaks in a language we can understand, and because God uses people to reach people, you can be confident in your calling. You can be courageous in your witness. And you can be certain of your salvation. Amen.