

May 20 – Pentecost – A New Beginning

Acts 2:1-21

When it comes to Pentecost, the most dramatic change among the disciples was in the life of Peter. Let's track his behavior, as recorded in the various gospels, between the last meal in the upper room with Jesus to the day of Pentecost. At dinner we find him protesting, when Jesus washes the feet of the disciples. He was not going to allow Jesus to act like a servant towards him. When Jesus insisted, Peter does his usual thing and goes all in saying, "Wash not just my feet but my hands and my head." Later, when Jesus says that one of them will betray him, Peter boldly proclaims that even if the rest would flee he will stand firm, to the death, with Jesus. Then we move on to the garden and in one of the Gospel accounts Peter seems to hold firm to his words by drawing his sword and striking off the ear of the slave of the high priest. Yet when Jesus tells him to put away his sword he flees with the rest. Later we hear of his denying Jesus three times while in the courtyard of the high priest. All of his earlier bluster is now gone. On the night of the resurrection we find him hiding in fear behind locked doors with the others. Later, in John, we find him meeting Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee where three times he must affirm his love, as if he needed to wipe away the times of denial, while being told to feed Jesus' sheep. What does that mean? Neither Peter nor the others knew. This brings us to Pentecost. The disciples are again in the upper room behind locked doors when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. Luke describes it as a mighty wind and a fire that inflames their hearts. The result is that Peter and the others are no longer content to hide behind doors. They go and stand on the roof and proclaim the good news.

What made the difference? The quick answer is that he received the Holy Spirit. But, as with all of us, God is often at work in our lives preparing us for those dramatic moments. I see three things happening in Peter's life that culminated in that moment on the roof of the house. What happened for Peter is also available for us.

First, Peter received the power of forgiveness. All of us feel guilty for things we have said or done. Can any of us imagine what Peter was feeling after Jesus is raised from the dead? After proclaiming that he would be brave he ends up denying Jesus three times just as Jesus predicted. Now we have him meeting Jesus as the risen Christ and there is no hiding from his guilt. Peter likely expected that he would hear words of condemnation or

rejection. They were deserved. Instead he hears the charge to feed Jesus' sheep. Jesus, without saying the words, forgives Peter and gives him a new and important task. Earlier Jesus had said to Peter that he was the rock on which he would build his church. This reconfirms that commitment of Jesus.

We all know how guilt saps our strength and resolve. We remain quiet, try not to be around the people we have let down, and are tense waiting for that time when we are confronted by our past deeds. Do you also remember what a freeing and empowering thing it is to hear, "I forgive you?" When one is willing to set aside the past and move forward, we are changed. Peter had experienced this and was already a third of the way through the Pentecost experience after his time with Jesus by the sea.

There, on the beach, Peter also received anew the power of love. Jesus was always talking about, and showing through his actions, how much God loves us. We see this in its purest form after the resurrection. Think about how he responded to Mary Magdalene in her grief at the tomb. Think about how he struggled with Thomas until he came to a point of belief. Think about how he walked beside the disciples on the road to Emmaus, opening the scriptures to them until their hearts burned within them. All of these are examples of one who is caring and loving towards those around him. So think about that time on the shore. When he asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Jesus could have just as easily said, "Do you love me as much as I love you?" Peter in responding, "Lord, you know I love you" was also proclaiming that he felt love.

Think about those times when you have received unmerited love. Someone forgives you when they have every right to remain angry. Someone does something special for you just because. Someone goes out of their way to help you. Someone takes special effort to thank you for something you have done. You know those moments and how they warm you right down to the center of your soul. They are empowering and life giving moments.

Ashley England went to dinner at the Stag-N-Doe pizza restaurant in China Grove with her family on Friday evening, including her 8-year-old son, Riley. The family was sitting at the table when Riley, who has special needs, began to get "a little rowdy." He was looking at things on his mother's phone when he threw the phone and started screaming. She recalled how, "The past few weeks have been very hard and trying for us as a family -

especially with public outings. Riley was getting loud and hitting the table and I know it was aggravating to some people."

Just when England was ready to leave without eating, a waitress appeared. "I'll try to do this without crying," the waitress told the family. "But another customer has paid for your bill tonight and wanted me to give you this note." The note read: "God only gives special children to special people."

Riley is non-verbal and has been through three major brain surgeries for a severe form of epilepsy. The seizures started when he was 18-months-old, robbing him of his speech. His mom says he had more than 100 seizures a day. Riley's frustration with being unable to speak, often leads to outbursts. England says the kindness of the mystery diner made her cry.

"To have someone do that small act towards us shows that some people absolutely understand what we are going through and how hard it is to face the public sometimes," she said. "They blessed me more than they know." She says she wants to say thank you to the person that paid for their meal and sent the encouraging words. "Little did he know what struggles we had been facing lately and how this kindness was surely needed at that moment," she said. Unmerited forgiveness and kindness given make a huge difference.

One thing more was needed. For me, Pentecost is God giving us the gift of conviction. For the disciples, the rushing wind and tongues of fire and being able to speak in different languages all meant one thing. Jesus was risen. Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus was the Son of God. There was no question or doubt. Pentecost gave them the power of conviction. When you have felt forgiveness and love and feel God fully in your heart you are empowered.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was struggling in his faith when he went to a prayer meeting at Aldersgate Street. While there he felt his heart strangely warmed. Even more, he felt God had died for him. He had a personal encounter with God and, from that moment on, Wesley shared a faith of personal piety. In spite of challenges from within his home church, the Church of England, he was not deterred. He felt forgiven and loved and was convinced that God was with him. Aldersgate was his

Pentecost moment. It didn't come with rushing wind or tongues of flames or the ability to speak in different languages, but it did come with a spirit of conviction.

Where are you needing to say, "Come Holy Spirit?" Where do you need liberation from your guilt? Where do you need to hear words of forgiveness? Say, "Come Holy Spirit." Where do you need God's love to touch your heart in a new way? Say, "Come Holy Spirit." Where do you need the conviction that God is with you and the path you are on is the one God has selected? Say, "Come Holy Spirit." The message of this day is that we are offered these gifts. Pentecost is not about some day but today. It is not just a story about the disciples being empowered for mission it is a story about us being empowered today.

In closing let me share with you a modern day Pentecost story. I recall reading a story in Guidepost about a country western singer's life journey. I am sorry to say I cannot remember now the individual but I recall her story. She had always loved to sing but life growing up was tough. She kept doubting whether or not she should try for a singing career. Her family was poor and it seemed like the best thing she could do for them was to go to work right out of high school and start contributing to the family's welfare. To seek a career, where more failed than succeeded, seemed foolish. She was also a person of faith and kept praying that God would show her the right path. One day, as high school graduation neared she went to visit her grandmother. Grandma was not only the matriarch of the family she was also the faith rock on which the entire clan was anchored. She poured out her questions and doubts and struggles. Grandma just listened. When she was done, grandma closed her eyes, praying, and when she finally opened them again she looked at her granddaughter and said, "Do you believe God gave you your singing talent?" She replied, "Of course." Grandma then said, "It would be a sin to not see how God wants you to use that gift." All of a sudden her doubts and guilt fell away. She felt the conviction that she should try as hard as she could to use her voice. If it didn't work then she would move on without regret. The rest, as we say is history. She did become a success. But it was that conviction that God was on the path with her that gave her the power to try.

So pray, "Come Holy Spirit, Come," come with power and conviction. AMEN.