

**The Episcopal Church in the Pemi Valley**  
**The Day of Pentecost      May 15, 2010**

Today is the Day of Pentecost, a day for the Church that is as important as Christmas or Easter. It is the day on which we celebrate the Church's beginning, its creation, its birthday.

Others might dispute the assertion that Pentecost is the birthday of the Church. One of my favorite writers, Robert Capon, says that the Church was really born on Good Friday when Jesus asked the Father to forgive us – and when, as he put it, “a few bewildered women and men wondered off wondering how they were going to live with that.” Pentecost, though, is the celebration of the power of the resurrection revealed in an outpouring of God's energy, God's gift of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, to each and every member of the Body of Christ.

*I. Shavuot*

The original day of Pentecost was an ancient Jewish holiday called ‘*Shavuot*,’ which means the Feast of Weeks. That feast came to be called “Pentecost” because its celebration fell on the “*pente*,” the 50<sup>th</sup>, day after Passover. The Book of Acts tells us that crowds of people were in Jerusalem on Pentecost, to celebrate the Torah and the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. It may seem strange that one would celebrate a set of laws or regulations for one's behavior. But the Torah is more than the Ten Commandments; it is more than all the ordinances and rules. The Torah is the entire first five books of the Hebrew Bible that tell the story of God's relationship to humankind. Thus the celebration of Pentecost was really the celebration of our relationship to God, and by extension, our relationships with all other people.

On that particular first century day celebrating the relationship between God and humanity, the Church records a transformation in that relationship. In the past, God's Spirit had temporarily come upon individuals with the gifts of strength, or insight, or wisdom, so that he or she might perform specific tasks. But on this day, that gifting of God's Spirit was there for one and all. **All** were filled with the Holy Spirit, and not just for specific occasions, but for the rest of their lives.

Luke, the author of The Book of Acts, struggles to find the right words to convey what happened, describing that experience as something not unlike an awesome, rushing blast of wind. The Hebrew word for ‘*wind*’ is the same word used for ‘*Spirit*’ or ‘*breath*.’ On that day, a rushing blast of *Spirit* overpowered and transformed those first followers of Jesus, and they were filled with God's powerful, life-giving, creative *breath*, which changed their lives, empowering them to become the Church. Luke says that the Spirit came with a feeling not unlike the rush of a mighty wind, breathing new life and fresh energy into the people of God.

In the Gospel of John, the gift of the Spirit comes to the disciples on Easter night, and it is described as Jesus *breathing* on the disciples and saying “*Receive the Holy Spirit...As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*”

But what does “*as the Father sent me*” mean? It means that the same Spirit that came upon Jesus at his baptism, is also there for you and me. Shortly after his baptism Jesus said, “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to preach the good news, to proclaim release and to set at liberty those who are bound.*” So we, too, in this **new** relationship to God, are likewise transformed, empowered to share the good news of God's forgiving love, in order to set free those who are bound by sin.

## II. Ask

The gospel lesson for today takes us back to the night of the Last Supper. Jesus has told his disciples that where he was going they could not go, but they were not to fear, for he goes on to say, *"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever...the Spirit of truth."*

Two weeks ago I said that the word translated here as *'advocate'* means one who comes alongside a person in need. In the Jewish court system, the advocate was the person who came to "plead the cause of another in a court of law," the one who pleads for us and defends us. So one might say, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid," you have a first class attorney on your side." More than just an advocate or attorney, with Pentecost comes a new, personal relationship with God. John quotes Jesus as saying, *"I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."*

Ask, and you shall receive. That sounds a bit fanciful, but what is meant here is not some kind of magic charm. To ask "in someone's name," is to ask with the same mind as that person. It is the same concept behind today's notion of Durable Power of Attorney for Healthcare. In exercising that power, we only ask what we know that person would have us ask. Thus to ask in the name of Jesus is to ask only what he would ask. And what he wants for us will be done.

I'm reminded of the old World War II story of a navy ship at sea on a very dark night. The captain on the bridge notices a bright light in the distance. He observes the light for a while, determining that their relative bearings remain the same, and that the light is drawing closer and closer. He concludes that they and this other ship are on a collision course.

Quickly the captain orders that a message be flashed: "Collision course! Alter your course 20 degrees north."

Almost immediately, back comes the reply: "Roger, collision course. Alter your course 20 degrees south."

Somewhat offended because he, as the captain, asked the other to avoid a collision, he sends a second message: "I am a Captain in the United States Navy, alter your course 20 degrees north."

Back comes the reply: "I am a Seaman, First Class, United States Navy, alter your course 20 degrees south."

Shocked and indignant, and now getting perilously close to a collision, the captain orders that one last message be sent: "We are a battleship of the line of the United States Navy, and we will not change our course; alter your course."

Back comes a final reply. "We are a lighthouse."

Ask and you shall receive, but what we ask for and how we ask must be in the name, in the character of Jesus.

## III. Variety of Gifts

The early church community in Corinth, to whom Paul wrote, was a church in which people were not asking the right things. They were not in right relationship with God or with one another.

The problem for the Corinthian Church was not immorality, but rather the conflict between various church members who thought they were better than one another. That congregation, like some churches today, was filled with gifted-people, people who had many different talents, a variety of different gifts and skills, but unfortunately they argued with each other about who was the most important, whose gifts were the best.

Paul explained to them that there are varieties of ways that God has blessed every one of us with gifts, with special talents, and not all of them are the same. But those talents, those gifts, which

are from God's Spirit, are intended by God for the common good. And then he went on to describe that gifted community as "*the Body of Christ*:" You are just like a human body – with many parts: arms and eyes, feet and ears. Paul chose that analogy for two reasons. The first is that it reminds us that **each** member of the body (whether it be an eye or an arm or whatever) is connected to the rest. If the body was to lose one part, it wouldn't be whole; it wouldn't be complete; it wouldn't be healthy. Therefore, no part of the body can say to another, "*I have no need of you.*"

But there was another reason why he used the analogy of a body as an image for the Church. It was a way of reminding us that, as Jesus is no longer physically with us, we are his arms; we are his eyes; we are his feet and hands in the world today. And each one of us has a part to play in the sharing the good news and setting people free. Unfortunately on occasion, we can forget whose gifts we have received. Sometimes, people undervalue their own gifts, but worse, sometimes they undervalue the gifts, the talents, the offerings of others.

An American missionary [Willis Jenkins] wrote of his experience in Africa: "The Sunday after my first arrival in Uganda, he wrote, I went to church. And though I had embarked upon my mission experience in great excitement to experience the African church, and in what I thought was a profound openness to what I might find, something happened in church that first Sunday that I found quite offensive."

There were several offerings taken during the service, in which people some people gave money, but others gave pieces of fruit or vegetables that they had grown.

"Toward the end of the liturgy... a well-dressed man sitting up front stood up and gathered all the non-cash items that had been given in the multiple offerings and (to the missionary's surprise) started selling them. For awhile it appeared that, perhaps, the church was selling these beans and vegetables to the poor at a discount rate – but no, it was clear that he was actively auctioneering, cajoling this peasant congregation into giving still more. And as the money for an item would come in, a treasurer off to the side would enter the amount in a ledger, tabulating the church's return."

The American was offended by "these money-hungry church officials," so blatantly extorting money from the poor, and his first thought was to imitate Jesus driving out the money changers. Later, he would discover to his dismay that this practice was quite the norm in many poor Ugandan churches – with one of the wealthier parishioners exhorting high prices for the fruits and vegetables brought in by the poor – right there in church.

During the course of his time in Uganda, the visiting missionary came to respect one of the village elders, and he noticed that this man seemed to take great delight in the mid-service auctions; in fact, they were his favorite part of the service. There was great cheering when a bag of beans was purchased for three times its market price, or a single melon offering sold for the price of a dozen. And the congregation would laugh when the church auctioneer forced someone to buy something at an inflated price.

Unable to understand all this, the missionary sought out the respected village elder, who finally explained to him that, by this practice, even poorest peasants, with literally nothing else than what they had grown from the ground that week, were turned into "great givers," for their two mangoes or three papayas having been offered, now brought much more money than they were worth, money which would be used to support the church's ministry. The richer members of the parish, in a kind of redistributive justice, would buy these goods at inflated prices, thus increasing the church offering of the poor farmer – and that poor man's newly valued gift was what the treasurer was recording in his book. Instead of looking down on the talents, the gifts of others, what those church

members had discovered was how to value everyone's gifts, everyone else's talents, as equal to their own.

What is the Day of Pentecost about? It is the celebration of God's gift of the Holy Spirit to each and every member of the community of faith, rich or poor, young or old. And it is a day of giving thanks for our relationship in the fellowship of the church to God and to one another.

Pentecost Sunday is a day to celebrate the wonderful diversity of every one of us, each and every one who is gifted with God's Spirit and who make up the Body of Christ. This is a day to celebrate God's gifting us and calling us to go wherever the Spirit leads us. For that Spirit, God's Spirit, is calling us into partnership with all of God's people to be the eyes and the ears, the arms and the hands of Christ, as we share in the ministry of his Church. *Amen*