

SPG#171, Pentecost A

May 11, 2008 – Fr. Charles Pope

Acts 2:1-11

1 Corinthians 12:4-13

John 20:19-23

The celebration of Pentecost affords us the opportunity of looking at this church and all churches that are part of the Church Universal through a lens that allows us to see the whole and the parts that make it up. I can recall in earlier years when I participated in many celebrations of Pentecost. In the scripture from Acts for that day there was a complexity, including tongues as of fire, people speaking in different languages, but able to discern what the others were saying clearly, a sound as of a wind, and reports of the empowering of the Holy Spirit. And on top of that complexity was the complexity of the larger Church itself with its many ministries and missions and controversies and failures and successes. And on top of that complexity was the many and varied dynamics of the local church where the celebration was taking place. And I can recall in times past, as I looked back on the celebration of Pentecost that I was not quite sure what I had celebrated, because a prominent part of the celebration had been my own confusion and sense of being overwhelmed. And so I confess to you today that there were times when I just gave up trying to understand it. And in some years it seemed like the Season after Pentecost was a vacation compared to Pentecost itself.

But in more recent times I have discovered that we are all called to the expanding of our hearts and minds to be able to appreciate and to comprehend the extraordinary dynamics of Pentecost. And they will be different year to year because the Church is different year to year.

This year we have the same complexity in Acts, of many fantastic and supernatural things going on in a confined space. And we have the complexity of the larger Church for this year of 2008. The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion are still caught up in the controversy over the ordination of those of contrasting sexual orientation. For the first time in our history we have a female Presiding Bishop. We continue in “The Call to Common Mission” agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, where clergy and communion are shared. Now we are engaged in discussions with the United Methodist Church, which more than likely will lead to some kind of a shared communion. At the institutional level there are financial concerns as shown by Seabury Western Seminary discontinuing its Master of Divinity program. Across the Episcopal Church there are concerns about dwindling resources and numbers of people. But also across the Episcopal Church we will find exceptional parishes, albeit few and far between, that are thriving.

And then there is the complexity of this church of St. Paul’s in Grinnell, and with all that we are doing here. And with all these layers of complexity and dynamics it may seem to be too much. And privately we may agree to give up trying to get our hearts and minds around it. And there are many communities of faith that have given up. And some of them have the personality of little hand wringing support groups. In such settings the followers of Jesus at Pentecost were not really empowered, but just encouraged. And in such places the symbols of Pentecost: the wind, the fire, and the speaking in different languages are novel and interesting, but not particularly empowering or inspiring.

If we look in the New Testament, we see in the disciples and followers around Jesus, that with him present, as he loved them, taught them, challenged them and astonished them, there was a gathering, a coming together, a community of faith and love. There was a oneness. In today's story of Pentecost in Acts, where all spoke different languages but understood each other, there was a oneness.

In these gatherings in the New Testament, there was never a guarantee of ongoing physical security or predictability. There was never any guarantee of ongoing comfort.

In fact, Jesus, particularly in the gospel of Luke, was always asking his followers to count the cost of following him. He was always asking them to be sure if they really wanted to do this.

For followers across the centuries it has never consistently been a piece of cake. If we look back in the history of the institutional Church, we see admirable and even astonishing service: the poor and the sick being cared for, the disenfranchised being lifted up, and uncountable good deeds. But amidst all of that service, there was also political intrigue, deception, and the abuse of the vulnerable.

To be sure we must always extend the hand of love and understanding to those who are overwhelmed. And we must be free to admit that in ourselves so that each one of us can be cared for. But all in all, in the big picture, we are not called to timidity, defeat, and hand wringing support groups. We are called to the wind, the fire, and the communication that knows no bounds. We as the church are called to Pentecost that empowers us to face and grapple with any difficulty or challenge.

All in all, in the big picture at all levels, in the pushing and in the pulling, I find the church to be incredibly alive. And like the first century followers of Jesus, I would gather with you around him, to love and be loved, to serve and to invest. The truth is that gathering around Jesus to be the Church is as much a calculated risk as following him in the first place.

And so the question that appears before us as Christians every day is this – With eyes wide open, with as little illusion as possible, would you gather around Jesus Christ in this place, and with these people and be the church? The rewards of being one in Christ, of working, hoping, and loving together are immense. But there are no guarantees. And we are always asked to count the cost. The answer to that question is the real birth of the church. If your answer is "yes," and if it continues to be "yes," then whoever you are, and wherever you come from, we can be one in Christ. We can be the Church. From my standpoint, I believe in you. I believe in us. I believe in being the Church with you.

The true church today, regardless of the history of the larger Church, is in our hearts and in our togetherness in Christ. It is in the decisions we make about us together. If there were no walls here, no floor, no ceiling, there would still be a church because we are here. When the church is affirmed, when community in Christ is affirmed, it is cause for celebration, Pentecost celebration. Because in that celebration is the hope of love that overcomes any barrier, of service that answers any situation. And so with clear minds, free of illusions, I call upon us to say "yes" to Jesus Christ. I call upon us to say "yes" to the church that is among us. And I call upon us to say "yes" to the future. Amen.