

“Pentecostal Fire” The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey May 11, 2008
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church (USA)

Text: Acts 2:1-20 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 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 our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

“In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

TODAY IS PENTECOST, the day we rejoice that the Holy Spirit came upon the fearful and uncertain followers of Jesus, filling them with the courage to believe and proclaim and go forth--even when their very lives were in danger.

Luke says there were about 120 of them, disciples who had witnessed the resurrection of Jesus, and who took seriously his final instruction: Wait for the Spirit, wait for the right time, prepare yourselves, pray, study, wait. And believe. They had been waiting for nearly two months. Oh these men and women believed – but they were also afraid.

On this day of Pentecost, Jerusalem was overflowing with devout Jews from throughout the known world. They gathered for the Feast of Weeks or Shavuot This involved a mandatory pilgrimage to the Temple, to celebrate the first fruits of the year’s harvest, As well as the correlative celebration of the Law as it was first given to Moses . The disciples were a marked minority. The crowds had long since forgotten Jesus, rejected the resurrection, and would have mocked or derided any isolated, increasingly uncertain Jesus followers.

And then everything changed. With drama and excitement and force, suddenly those huddled to the side were propelled to the center. Fear was gone and somehow, disciples, which means followers, became apostles, which means those sent out, leaders. Somehow, miraculously, they were able to speak and communicate their story to strangers with strange languages. The frightened and dejected followers of Jesus were suddenly bursting out of their shelter into the streets of Jerusalem, telling everyone around about what they had experienced with Jesus and what they knew to be true about the amazing life-saving power of God's love.

Filled with the Spirit they found their voices to speak boldly, publicly and passionately about their Jesus: About their Jesus and the love of God they discovered when they were with him. About their Jesus and how God loves and cares about everyone, even the poorest, most marginalized, and even the most wealthy. About their Jesus and the compassion in action, the justice, that he, and they, and everyone is called to and expected to live out in this world. About their Jesus and how not even the grave could stop him from caring about them and us.

Does this sound too good to be true, perhaps like a Star Wars movie or cartoon ending? Does it make you feel a little like a rural farmer who brought his family on their very first visit to a big city? They drove their pick up to the hotel door, and as he went ahead to check in, he saw his very first elevator. He watched a very plain, plump, middle-aged woman step inside one of those little rooms. The doors closed. After about a minute, the doors opened and out stepped a curvy beautiful young lady. Quickly he punched his son and said, "Boy, go get your Maw. I'm gonna run her through that thing one time."

It's not too good to be true, because the fire of Pentecost is no more and no less than the fire of courage. The fire of conviction. It was then and it is now the place where it no longer matters what others think, it only matters what you know, what you feel, how God is working in you. It's the place where you let go of judgment from others and tend to the judgment of the Spirit. It's the place where you are suddenly relieved of the bondage of self and surrender to the truth and passion of a faithful and Spirit filled witness, each according to our own particular gift and passion. It'd the place where you no longer compare yourself to others, but connect with your fellow beings. It's the compulsion to care and to speak truth to power.

No, this Pentecost experience is not really such an incredible fairy tale or magic show at all. It's an experience of empowerment and freedom.

The fire of the Spirit is easy to recognize in others. Certainly we saw it in Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, in Nelson Mandela and in Mother Jones or Dorothy Day.

We see the fire of the Spirit today in Jeremiah Wright. You recognize that name – the now- retired UCC minister of Trinity Church in Chicago, the former but formative pastor to Barak Obama. Jeremiah Wright is one of great prophetic preachers of our day, in the tradition of biblical prophets who said outrageous and controversial things, things that got them into trouble, but things that caused people to pay attention. While press and politicians condemn him, Rev Wright said. "I continue to be a pastor who speaks to the people of God about the things of God."

Do we know what is it like to be poor and black in the US? In one of his interviews he commented that on those slave ships coming over from Africa, the ship owners and shipmates were religious folk who prayed regularly. And down in the hold, those bound up black prisoners were also religious and prayed regularly. But the prayers, and the needs and the context, and the very relationship with God, were very different. The Spirit was upon Rev Wright as he led a struggling band of worshippers into a powerful inner city witness, a congregation that now fully lives out its vision. If we listen to Rev. Wright in the Spirit of Pentecost, we recognize that he was speaking his own language to his own congregation. The words may not be our words, but the intention, the passion, the conviction, the love of God and of people are shared trademarks of a deep faith. We hear the Spirit speaking in many languages, and our heart understands the one message.

We saw the fire of the Spirit in the first Mother's day back in 1870. "Arise then women of this day!" goes the Mother's Day proclamation. But this is not your wake-up call to French toast and flowers. Instead this phrase was the rallying cry for the first Mothers' Day of Peace —before the day became laden with Hallmark and guilt. Julia Ward Howe, the creator of Mother's day, pleaded with women to speak out against war, not only for the sake of their sons, but for the sons of mothers across the globe.

We can see the fire of the Spirit in our sisters and brothers who fight for full inclusion of gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgendered – folk who stand against those who would protect the power structure of the church over its theological integrity. The fire of the Spirit answers the incessant "*It's not time! It will split the church! It will tear apart our unity!*" with: "*No, it will not destroy us, it will save us.*" The Spirit is working through those who insist on shifting the church back to its dominant Christian mission of a radically welcoming and loving God, instead of a limited and exclusive institution. The fresh fire of the Spirit would free us from the gender dominance and exclusive practices that we know in our hearts to be wrong.

We can see it in others, but can we recognize the fire of Pentecost within ourselves? It's not always as dramatic as the Biblical story. I am sure that fire was burning when I sat in a Town Meeting at Old First Church, over on Van Ness almost 20 years ago. Unsure of my own direction, I listened to social justice ministers talk about work on the streets of the Tenderloin, in the halls of hospitals, in AIDS house calls and support groups, in group homes and juvenile halls. Yearning to have my own life mean something, I realized that these people were doing what I wanted to do in this world, and they were doing it through the church. All my questions, all the balls I was juggling, fell into one basket, and I did not feel alone anymore. I was in Seminary six weeks later.

How is the fire of Pentecost working in your life? In the life of our church?

If Jesus inaugural sermon was "The Spirit of the Lord has come upon me to preach good news to the poor," then how are we doing that? Are we setting the captives free? Are we opening the eyes of the blind? The Spirit challenges us to make faith more than a footnote in our lives, to make it the primary chapter of our lives. This is especially difficult in the American context, where a market culture convinces people to push faith to the margins, decry it with skepticism, even disgust.

But the fire of our faith can propel us and sustain us where discouragement or grief would otherwise paralyze us and imprison us.

It is a myth, for instance, that we can't eradicate abject poverty in our lifetime – Despite the current crisis in food prices and availability, the number of people worldwide who survive on less than \$1 a day dropped 27 percent between 1981 and 2001. And whereas poverty was once spread all over the world, it is now largely concentrated in fewer than 60 small countries in the sub-Saharan region, Asia and Latin America. Church World services has been a key player in this continuous gradual movement toward justice. We are called to declare the unimaginable. Jim Wallis tells a powerful story that took place during the time, to all outward appearances, apartheid had a strangle-hold on power in South Africa and Nelson Mandela was still in jail. During an uprising, a public rally that had been planned by the religious community was canceled by the government, so a church service was held instead. The sanctuary was ringed by government police as the service proceeded. At one point, Bishop Desmond Tutu stepped in front of the pulpit and pointed at the police, saying, “You are very powerful, but I serve a God who will not be mocked, and I am telling you that apartheid is wrong and it is dead.” And then he said to the police, “Since you have already lost, I invite you to join the winning side; come into the midst of us and join in the dance.”

The Holy Spirit empowers the church to be the agent of change in the world, a counter-cultural entity. The work of the Spirit is first of all to bring people into relationship, with God and with each other, within the church and with the world around it. The task of the church is to breathe in the Spirit and be inspired by the Spirit to act on behalf of God. As the Spirit of God flows into us, it also ought to flow from us in the way we treat one another, the way we speak to one another, in the way we treat others in our community, in the way we live out the new life we receive when we accept Jesus

Jesus is counting on you and you and you and me. But the good news is, we are not alone. The Holy Spirit is here to melt us, mold us, fill us, and use us. Thanks be to God for Pentecost.