

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for Sunday, July 26, 2020

“A Pentecost Church”

Acts 2:1-11

In the days of the great California gold rush, some prospectors discovered a very rich mine. “We’ve got it made,” they said, “As long as we don’t tell anybody else, before we stake our claims.” And they made a vow of secrecy.

But they had to go into town for provisions and tools. When they left town, a great host of people followed them. Why? Their “secret” was written all over their faces. It was impossible for them to hide what they had found.

Later on, a gifted speaker was asked his most difficult speaking assignment. He said it was an address to the National Conference of Undertakers entitled “How to Look Sad at a Ten-Thousand Dollar Funeral.”

It was impossible for the disciples to mask their joy that first Pentecost. They were so happy and boisterous that some passersby accused them of being intoxicated. Imagine people driving by our church, and seeing us so excited that they think we are drunk. The image is mind-boggling.

One of America’s favorite and most thoughtful humorists was Erma Bombeck. In one of her columns, she told about the little boy in front of her in church. He was just as quiet as could be, and certainly wasn’t bothering anyone, but every once in a while, he would turn around and smile happily at everyone behind him. He did this several times to the pleasure of everyone who could see him. Suddenly, his mother jerked him around, and told him in a loud whisper to stop grinning—he was in church. When tears came to the little fellow’s eyes, his mother said, “That’s better.” I doubt anyone would mistake that mother’s demeanor for drunkenness. How sad.

Many of us long to see the modern church infused with the same joy, same love, same energizing power that characterized the church that first Pentecost. That is only natural. We need to understand, however, the first Pentecost was a unique event in human history. The descent of the Spirit on the church that sacred day was an act of God, not man. It was not something that was conjured by the disciples. Because it was an act of God, we need to see some very important implications.

FIRST OF ALL, PENTECOST REMINDS US THE CHURCH IS THE CREATION OF GOD. We are unlike any other institution in that respect. Beginning with Christ’s selection of the twelve disciples, and continuing through His crucifixion, His ascension, and the Day of Pentecost, the church was born in the mind of God long before anyone was baptized or the first Lord’s Supper was served.

Note the scene at the church’s birth. The disciples were gathered all together in one place. But this was no constitutional convention. No one turned to Simon Peter and said, “Pete, you call the meeting to order. And after Matt has the invocation, we will get on with the business of starting this new church.” Nothing like that occurred. The Scripture tells us simply that they were gathered in one place and “suddenly a sound came from heaven, like a mighty wind, and filled all the house where

they were. And there appeared tongues of fire, distributed and resting on each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (RSV) That is how the church was born—not from below, but from above.

That is a most encouraging truth to me. A Pennsylvania denominational executive tells of his family’s stay in a dilapidated hotel one summer while on vacation. They had made reservations long in advance, sight unseen. Upon awaking the morning after their arrival, they heard the steady thud of a wrecking ball working very close to them. The thuds kept getting closer, and closer. Suddenly, they realized the huge wrecking ball was hitting the very building in which they were housed. They went out into the hall, and looked out the window. The hotel was being torn down around them.

There are many churches and denominations that must feel like they are being housed in that hotel, and the wrecking ball is already at work. One major denomination was losing 800 members EVERY DAY from membership rolls. That’s scary—unless you believe the church is of God. Individual local churches may lose their way. Even great denominations may fade into history. But the church of Jesus Christ cannot fail. Why? Because it is not a human INVENTION, but a Divine INTERVENTION. If the church of our generation fails, God will rise up a new, and bolder church to take its place. The church is the creation of God.

IN THE SECOND PLACE, PENTECOST REMINDS US THE CHURCH EXISTS FOR ONE PRIMARY PURPOSE—TO COMMUNICATE TO THE WORLD THE LOVE OF GOD REVEALED IN CHRIST JESUS, OUR LORD.

Notice the manifestation of tongues. First, we have “tongues of fire”, distributed, and resting on each of them.” Then they began to “speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” But wait, this isn’t speaking in tongues in the usual sense. There were no interpreters present. None were needed. Indeed, in spite of persons present from many different nations, each heard the disciples in his own language. What an amazing miracle of communication! How many times problems between groups of people have been aggravated by a breakdown in communication.

Remember how Paul warned against speaking in tongues without an interpreter present. The purpose of the church is to communicate. We are God’s Word in the world today. Why? Because we are Christ’s body, and He is the Eternal Word. We are called to communicate the Good News of God’s love, revealed in Christ.

There is a story about an English gentleman named Alfie. Alfie could do nothing right. He bungled everything he ever touched. One day, in a moment of deep despair and desperation, he tried to take his own life. He failed at that, too. While he was in the hospital, a friend came to visit. The friend asked, “Alfie, why did you do it?” And Alfie responded, “Because there is no good news anywhere. There just can’t be any good news anywhere. Because, if there was, surely someone would have come running to share it with me.”

The world is filled with Alfies—just waiting for someone to bring good news into their lives. And, we are charged with that responsibility.

Now, we communicate this love in many ways.

Those who are sports fans have undoubtedly noticed those big scripture signs at sporting events: the Super Bowl, Monday Night Football, baseball, golf tournaments, the Olympics, the Indy 500, etc. In bold letters, we read “JOHN 3:16,” “II COR. 5:17,” “ROM. 5:8” They pop up on bed sheets hanging from the upper decks, behind home plate, over golfer’s heads as they putt, and even at the Miss America Pageant.

THE CHURCH IS GOD’S CREATION, OUR PURPOSE IS COMMUNICATION OF GOOD NEWS OF GOD’S LOVE REVEALED IN JESUS CHRIST. THE ULTIMATE GOAL, HOWEVER, IS THE CREATION OF A NEW COMMUNITY. I cite two pieces of evidence. First of all, peoples from many different nations were present on this occasion, and each heard the Gospel in his own tongue. The good news is not restricted to a particular nation, or race, or class. The Gospel cuts across every dividing line in society. And secondly, notice at the end of the second chapter, the description of the early church following this Pentecost experience: “And all who believe were together, and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods, and distributed them to all, as any had need. And, day by day, attending the temple together, and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number, day by day, those being saved.” (44-47)

The Christian faith is a communal faith. “Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am also.” The purpose of Pentecost was not simply saving individual souls, but creation of a new community. The community is the church. The strength of the church is love.

During the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in the days of Mussolini, Christian believers suffered considerable persecution. In his book, FREE ON THE MOUNTAINS, Raymond David tells of the love by believers for each other during this affliction, which made a major impression on unbelievers. For example, no provision was made to feed prisoners in jail by the invading army. This was the responsibility of relatives and friends. Christians in prisons had no problem, though. They were well-cared for by friends and family. In fact, so much food was brought them by fellow believers and church groups, that enough remained to feed unbelieving prisoners also.

This observable love, vibrant though nonverbal, brought many to seek the Lord. Such love was previously unheard of. As a result, the word spread far and wide. Non-believers sought out believers, to learn more about the Christian faith. When prisoners who had come to know Christ while in jail were released, they went back home, and attended the nearest church.

It is only right, then, that we should pray we might be a Pentecost church, if we understand what that means. The church at Pentecost was the creation of God, not man. The church at Pentecost communicated the Good News of Jesus Christ to all. The church at Pentecost was a community of faith, hope, and love.

I don’t want people driving by this morning to think we are intoxicated but I would like for them to see the joy on our faces. I would like them to see how much we love one another. And I would like them to know there is good news in the world—the good news of God’s great gift of Jesus Christ.

AMEN!

S.D.G.=Soli Deo Gloria