



SERMONS THAT WORK

Day of Pentecost (C)

Will You?

[RCL] Acts 2:1-21 or Genesis 11:1-9; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; Romans 8:14-17 or Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17, (25-27)

As a nation, we love an unlikely origin story. From the rise of the working-class Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller to become titans of industry, to the legends of the garage tinkerers who became Apple and the dorm room coders who became Google, the idea of the American Dream is fueled by stories of surprising success. All of these, however, look *utterly* predictable when compared with the astonishing rise of Christianity in the first and second centuries.

One year, the church is nothing but a couple of laborers, some stay-at-home moms, a few fishermen, and a tax collector in the hinterlands of the Roman Empire, and the next, Christian churches are popping up like mushrooms all over the ancient Mediterranean world! How could a few Palestinian peasants accomplish all of this? The apostles frequently misunderstand Jesus, even deny and betray him – these are not the great founders of a mythical past, but profoundly real, regular human beings; and yet, from these 12, these 70, these few hundred, come you, me and The Episcopal Church; from these humble origins spring the Lutherans, the Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, and the Pentecostal Free Will Baptists. This infinitesimally tiny Palestinian sect of Judaism, *in a single generation*, spreads like wildfire and goes on spreading to become today's 2.4 billion Christians, the largest group of human beings on planet earth.

How can this possibly have happened? The day of Pentecost! Now, what I am about to say may shock you, but Pentecost is not exclusively a Christian feast day. Instead, Pentecost is one of the principal feasts of Judaism and celebrates the giving of the Torah to the people of God; it is the feast of the reception of the revelation of God by those who are called to spread the knowledge of him to all nations.

In today's reading from Acts, we see the Christian Pentecost, at which, "a sound like the rush of a violent wind" fills the entire house where the apostles had gathered, and, "divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them [and] all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit." God the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples, fills the disciples, transforms the disciples, and they go from being a group of C-minus students of the Lord hiding out in an upper room to being Christians on fire with the love of God.

Suddenly, there is no more fumbling, no more confusion. They are aflame with God the Holy Spirit; it is not until *this* moment, in which they are filled with the presence of God, that they are transformed into the living temple of the Spirit: the church. Suddenly, they are unstoppable. Each goes out into a different, far-flung corner of the world to share the Good News of the love of God the Father, the incarnation, teaching, death, and resurrection of God the Son, and the life-giving inspiration of God the Holy Spirit.

Doubting Thomas sets out to preach the Gospel in India and founds the Church of St. Thomas, which exists to this day. St. Peter goes to Antioch and Rome, spreading Christianity throughout Europe. St. Matthew goes to Syria, St. John to Turkey and Greece, and in a short matter of years, the church is born. The apostles are not founding mild-mannered enquirers classes, or casual house churches with folks sitting on couches and singing Kumbayah; this was the age of the martyrs, in which being a Christian meant being willing to die for the sake of the Gospel. And still, ancient people gave themselves in droves to this new faith in Christ.

St. Basil of Caesarea, in his book “On the Holy Spirit,” says that, even though God is surrounding us, filling all things, we cannot see him; even though we have his perfect image in Jesus, walking with us, teaching us, leading us through the darkness, we cannot comprehend him; and so, it takes God the Holy Spirit, filling us with light, surrounding us with the fire of his love, to know God.

“If only,” we might say, “I, too, had been present on that Pentecost morning,” “If only I, too, had received a tongue of flame,” “If only I, too, had been filled with the Holy Spirit, transformed by the Holy Spirit,” “If only I, too, had the same intimacy with God, the same indomitable courage in God, the same astonishing ability to do the works of Christ, to draw all those around me to Christ...” But guess what? If you have been baptized in the baptism of Jesus, you *have* been baptized with fire and the Holy Spirit. You *have* shared in Pentecost, just as the apostles did. You, too, have become a walking, talking temple of God the Holy Spirit. Baptism is our Pentecost, it is our reception of the fullness of God dwelling within us, animating us, and transforming us. To live the apostolic life, to do Christ’s works of peacemaking, reconciling, healing, and feeding, all we now have to do is say “Yes!” to the presence of God within us. And if you haven’t been baptized, then get ready for the most important moment of your life!

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells us, “If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.” God the Holy Spirit enables us to truly ask in the name of Jesus, to truly reach out and comprehend, and take the offer of the Lord’s grace, and we ourselves, in him, are capable of his works. What do you want to ask in the name of Jesus? What do you really want in life? What is your heart’s greatest desire? If all things are now possible through God the Holy Spirit, what is it that you really want?

I don’t mean something silly and fleeting like owning 10 cars, having a billion dollars, or living to be 110 — these might bring minor happiness for a time, but they won’t bring about anything of lasting importance. I’m talking about much bigger, more audacious requests: What do you *really* want? To be full to the brim with joy in every moment? To be in a constant state of perfect peace? To have infinite reservoirs of

patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? To be utterly invulnerable even to death itself? These are not absurd hopes, but the literal fruits of the Spirit. They are what it looks like to say “Yes!” and “Yes!” and “Yes!” to God.

Pentecost didn’t only happen thousands of years ago in Jerusalem. It happens to every Christian at baptism, and Pentecost is happening in the church today. God the Holy Spirit dwells within you. Will you give your life to be his temple?

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