

Sunday – June 12, 2011  
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook  
Sermon – **Pentecost**

St. Matthias UMC  
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**Scripture: Acts 2:1-21**

“Pentecost” in Greek means “Fiftieth Day.” It is a Jewish holy day, The Feast of Weeks, a harvest festival that comes 50 days after Passover. It is one of 3 “pilgrimage feasts” when the entire household of Israel gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate God’s generosity towards the nation.

For Christians, Pentecost is the Birthday of the Church, falling about 50 days after Easter.(the Last Supper is widely considered to have been a Passover meal)

Pentecost is *the point* of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Without Pentecost, there would be no church, nobody to carry on the teachings of Jesus Christ. It is the moment when the few people who had been following Jesus suddenly have 3,000 brothers and sisters in the faith. After Pentecost - and *because* of Pentecost, throughout the book of Acts, we find thousands of people becoming Christians, growing into the Church.

In Acts 1, Jesus promises that the disciples would be baptized by the Holy Spirit, then he ascends into heaven, and the disciples cast lots to determine who would replace Judas. It turned out to be Matthias. So, when the whole world turns upside down just a few days later, Matthias is in the house with the other disciples.

The entire event of the Holy Spirit falling down upon the disciples takes a mere 4 verses to describe. The Spirit first makes itself known as a sound, a sound like wind, a mighty wind, but inside the house. Then, it provides something that looked like fire, with a flame on the head of each disciple.

Notice first of all that this experience is felt by everyone in the house. It is not just for Peter, James and John. The Holy Spirit fills each one of them. The Holy Spirit, while being felt by each individual disciple, calls them all together as a community. This is not a personal experience of the presence of God, such as we might find while doing our devotions. This is a corporate experience, something that infects the entire group of people who are present. They are called and empowered to be a *people* who belong to God.

And what happens when they are called and empowered? Those disciples explode out of the house and begin preaching about Jesus Christ - who he was, why he came, what he meant to them. And because Jews from all over the known world were within earshot, the Holy Spirit gave them the gifts to speak languages they had no business knowing.

These “devout Jews” who had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, were impressed by the fact that these multi-lingual preachers were Galileans. They could tell by the clothes the disciples were wearing, and their distinct accent, that they were from Galilee, a backwoods sort of place where people did not speak many foreign languages. So, for the first witnesses, part of the miracle of their speaking in so many languages, was that they were Galileans. That made the experience even more incredible than it was on the surface.

So, all these pilgrims, from an area of literally thousands and thousands of square miles including Turkey, the entire Middle East and the Persian Gulf region, and north Africa, heard these backwoods preachers “speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

“All were amazed” but some were skeptical, saying the disciples were just drunk.

The power of God is right in their face, a great miracle was happening right before their eyes, and they chalk it up to drunkenness. How can they miss the Truth that is going on all around them?

A better question might be how *we* miss the Truth that is going on all around us. God is doing things all the time that just go right by us. Beautiful days are given to us, the opportunity to gather as a people of God comes twice each Sunday, God is speaking to us through the things we read or watch, or through people who say things to us that might seem unkind.

God works in an infinite number of ways, and most of them remain a mystery to us because they are not the way we expect God to be working. We simply don’t recognize God’s work because it isn’t what we expect. Just like the skeptics in the crowd who couldn’t get past the fact that uneducated Galilean peasants were speaking all the languages of the known world. It wasn’t how they expected to meet God on this pilgrimage to Jerusalem, so there must be some other explanation. So, they came up with “new wine.”

At that point, ten of the disciples stop preaching, and Peter takes over as the spokesman for God. The first thing he says is that they aren't drunk because it's only 9am. I have always found this to be an amazingly lame explanation, as if it were impossible for a group of men to be drunk at 9am. But, that's what he gives us before he moves on to quote from the OT prophet Joel about the Last Days.

Clearly, those weren't the last days. Of course, Joel, who was writing over 500 years before this Pentecost, did not see the last days either. 2,500 years have come and gone since Joel wrote his prophecy, and 2,000 years since Peter used it to explain what was going on with the disciples that day. Predictions of the end of the world, including last month, have proven 100 percent wrong. It's an amazing record, really.

So, why would Peter quote an old prophet about the end of the world? Well, in this prophecy, the Spirit of God falls on everybody: sons and daughters, old men, slaves. It's about everybody receiving the Holy Spirit.

And that Pentecost was about the Holy Spirit being available to everybody. All the disciples had it, not just Peter. It was all of them, including the new guy, Matthias.

So, in a way, it was the last days: the last days before the powerful arrival of the Holy Spirit, and its offer to be a part of every single human life. It was the last days before the Church. So, maybe Joel and Peter weren't so far off.

Most world religions have a branch of mystics, men and women who have been extra-blessed to have insight into the nature of God. The Jews have the Hasidim, the Muslims have the Sufis, the Buddhists have Zen masters. But, Christianity doesn't have a special mystical branch, because the Holy Spirit is available to each one of us. The power to have an intimate and vital relationship with God through Jesus Christ is available to every single human being.

While some people are set apart for special work - monks, nuns, clergy, missionaries, for instance - they function entirely within the Body of Christ. We all have a call, and we all answer it in our own way. But, we are given a call, we are given gifts of the Spirit so that we can strengthen the Church. Nobody is given a spiritual gift for their own enjoyment. Every gift God

gives us is to be used to bolster the Kingdom, to strengthen and encourage the faithful, to create a more effective Body of Christ wherever we are.

What was the first thing the disciples did when they were filled with the Holy Spirit? They left the comfort of their house and began to share what they had with anyone who would listen.

Perhaps we need to take their example more to heart. Because we are part of the Church, we have something that needs to be shared. That something is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, our lord and savior, our redeemer and friend.

As a congregation of a denomination that is in its fifth decade of decline, we have to ask ourselves if we are sharing Christ with our community as much as we should. We have many people who do all kinds of missions locally and beyond. That is what Christ has called them to do. But, what about the rest of us? We have people who help with worship every Sunday. But, what about the rest of us? We have people serving on committees. But, what about the rest of us? We have generous givers. But, what about the rest of us? The Holy Spirit has arrived. It is here. We have only to welcome it into our hearts, accept the power it offers, and go where it sends us. St. Matthias UMC needs to be a place where this happens regularly. I'm going to try and figure out how to create this sort of atmosphere, where every single member feels the tug of the Holy Spirit, and the empowerment and encouragement to go and do. Help me with this. Pray for St. Matthias, its pastor and staff, and its lay leadership. And listen for divine guidance. Let's hear God's call, not only for each individual, but for the whole congregation. And, you need to decide to let God make you a part of the life and ministry of the church, so when someone looks at this church, they see something that they just can't explain. Three thousand people responded to the message preached by the disciples on that Pentecost. Let's see how many of our neighbors are intrigued enough by our walk with God to come and see what's up at St. Matthias.