

Pentecost C - 23 May 2010
Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-17, (25-27)
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Transitions are sometimes easy, especially when they are planned. Sometimes, transitions are more difficult than easy, usually because said transition was forced by circumstance., unplanned and unwelcome. Last week circumstances rather forced upon me a transition that I have been intending to attempt for some time now. I found myself suddenly needing to prepare and preach the sermon last Sunday when, on Saturday, I learned that the scheduled preacher would be unable to be with us. Our seminarian Marie Butterbaugh is much better now, thanks be to God. She is recovering nicely; her husband Tim is on the road, and Marie will fly out early tomorrow morning to their home in Florida. However, the suddenness of her hospitalization on Saturday forced me to recognize that I did not have sufficient time to put together notes for a sermon to preach the following day. Rather than draw up a sermon that I'd preached in some previous year and refresh it, I chose instead to gather my thoughts and impressions and preach from these.

Changing from the familiar way of being bound to notes or to the sacred confines, if you will, of the pulpit to doing this new and different thing is a change that I have wanted to make for some time. And I think last Sunday my express intentions finally caught up with my procrastinations. And having made that transition, forced upon us, in a way, but also embraced by us, we'll continue in this new way, in this product of the process of transition. As it happens, transition is a major element of what Pentecost Sunday represents in the history and life of the Church.

I read a story about a gathering of college alumni. It is thirty-year reunion, and a couple former classmates are speaking. "You see that one woman over there?" asks one fellow to the other. "Well," he goes on, "she's gotten so gray and so heavy that she doesn't even recognize me anymore." This story, I think, illustrates the difference between 'change' and 'transition.' Change happens; it is the nature of the created universe. Transition, however, can be declined, denied, refused, rejected. Or transition may be chosen, celebrated, accepted, embraced. Change involves switching pretty much entirely from one thing to another,

with little connection between one thing and the other, if any connection at all. But transition builds upon a foundation of what has come before. It connects the past with the present; it connects the present with the future. There is nothing inherently negative about change. But in that transition is more voluntary than change tends to be, there is certainly something good in transition.

Pentecost is about transition. The day of Pentecost that is reported in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles include some sensational occurrences that make this transition memorable. A little background, though, to help explain the context. Pentecost is the fiftieth day after the Feast of the Passover. In the days of the Apostles, it a Hebrew festival that celebrates the end of the first harvest, the gathering of what are called 'the first fruits of the land.' It is a feast that calls for Jews to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This is the reason that there are people present from all over the Mediterranean.

The sensational aspects of this unique Day of Pentecost make this particular celebration of the Feast all the more memorable. A great sound like rushing wind, the appearance of something like a little flame near the head of each apostle, and the sudden ability of the apostles to speak in languages other than their native Aramaic. Some are skeptical, and that's just the way of things when people are confronted by occurrences whose best or only explanation is God.

But others are there, too. And rather than assuming that the apostles are intoxicated on wine, they are asking a question: "What does this mean?" Remember that most theological of all questions? Here it is, in another form. It is the question, 'Why?' 'Why is this happening?' 'What does this mean?' The question is often the most important thing. And especially in this case, the answer is equally important. It is the meaning behind these sensational events. It is the meaning that makes these sensational events still important to Christians today.

To help explain its meaning, and to help him find it, the apostle Peter turns to a saying from a prophet who lived in an earlier time. He refers to a prophet named Joel and to some things that the prophet forecast for some time well

beyond his own future. God will pour out the Spirit of God upon all people, even upon the younger as well as the older, even upon the women as well as the men. No longer reserved for a select few, even these now will see that future that is coming, even these will speak of that future that is just about to arrive, even these will serve as guides to steer the rest of us in that direction of God. And that day, Peter suggests, is today.

It is a transition difficult for those people for whom this all seems to be forced upon them. But for Peter and others for whom the foundation of what seems new today was laid long ago in what has always been, the intimacy of God's presence in the Holy Spirit is at once both amazingly new, but also so consistent with the progression of God's relationship with humanity, that it seems almost equally amazing that more people aren't fully expecting it when it comes. And come it does. Expecting it or not, God moves the people forward in their relationship with God, and so also in their relationship with one another. Strangers to one another become kindred. Strangers to God learn that God is not only their creator, their sovereign, and their judge; God is also their Father.

It is the transition for which Jesus has prepared his disciples. Recalling this conversation from their time with Jesus before his resurrection and ascension, the disciples remember that they asked Jesus to show them God the Father. Jesus' response then, as now, is to help his followers understand that in meeting Jesus, in knowing Jesus, they have met God in person, they have found God's Love for them in person. As they look back on this from the bright side of the cross, the disciples likely note that Jesus even told them at the time that they soon would be reminded of these very words of Jesus by the presence of God come nearer among them all than even Jesus himself. These words are the foundation that Jesus lays to help prepare his followers to recognize their transition from being followers, disciples, and students of Rabbi Jesus, to people partaking of and carrying within themselves the very Spirit of God.

The Day of Pentecost is the Church's celebration of the blessed gift that you and I also are partakers of this same Holy Spirit; that we are entrusted with the responsibility of carrying within us this same presence of God into the world around us. It is a reminder also that you

and I meet with our own skeptics. Some of the folks do not accept our generosity our care, our welcome, as anything but a sign that we are deluded; as anything but evidence that we have not yet outgrown such infantile notions as the miraculous occurrences of love and goodness, and of the existence of a good and loving God that explains them. And it reminds us that we meet even the skeptic within ourselves, and so that we need be too shocked or discouraged when we do.

But Pentecost reminds us that the skeptic is neither the only one within nor the only one out there. And this is all the more important, I suggest, because the Church as a whole is experiencing a larger transition taking place all around it. Christian faith was for many centuries most located in the context of European and North American culture. But Christianity must now compete with a widening variety of spiritual, religious, and cultural world-views. The world around us all is asking, demanding, that we answer that same old question: 'What does all this mean?' And we really do need to answer it, because they, like we, really do want to know.

The unique voice given to each of us for others around us to hear who are listening for it, and the unique way of expressing it that is given to each person around us for us to experience when we are paying attention, reminds us that this drawing of person to person, this drawing of people to people, is exactly how people are drawn to God. When it feels to people that change is being forced upon them, unplanned and unwelcome, the experience of Pentecost invites them, and invites us, too, to consider the possibility that exchanging the certainty of what once was for the mystery of whatever it is that lies ahead is less about abandoning the past, or being abandoned by it. It is an invitation to the possibility that we are discovering with one another and with God that what has come before has been preparation for our transition to what God promises is about to be.

And so may Almighty God, who had guided the hearts of all faithful people by the gift of the Holy Spirit, grant that by the same Spirit we may evermore rejoice to share this holy comfort; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.