

"The Power of Pentecost"

Acts 2:1-21

May 27, 2012

The Day of Pentecost

We are a society that's in love with its technology. Whereas in the past we might have been consumed with the speed, performance and effectiveness of our cars, today it is our computers, phones, tablets, and other devices which have our attention. We want devices that will process the most information at the quickest speed. We keep looking for the fastest and most effective device.

Yet we often read articles that say the "device" that processes the most information in the most effective way at the fastest speed is the human brain. When we see that, we are a bit disappointed. After all, the brain doesn't seem as exciting as the latest smart phone or the coolest iPad. The brain is not very flashy. Effective? Yes. Flashy? Definitely not. So, what do we want – flashy or effective?

Today is the day of Pentecost – the coming of the Holy Spirit and the outpouring of His power upon the fledgling Church after Jesus' ascension ten days prior to that. We face the same dilemma in evaluating the Holy Spirit's power as we do with the power of processing information. Do we want the method which is flashy or the method is effective?

The day of Pentecost begins with the disciples gathered together in one place when the Holy Spirit came upon them. The presence of the Holy Spirit was made evident with "a sound like a mighty rushing wind" and the sight of "divided tongues as of fire". If you were writing a script for how the early Christian Church grew and was strengthened, you would say, "Here are the key events!" With these miraculous manifestations of the Spirit's presence and power, people will come flocking to the faith and the church will grow.

But that's not exactly what happened. Oh, sure, the people did come flocking, but not to faith. The text says that the people were amazed at these signs. They were perplexed at these signs. Some were even skeptical of these signs and mockingly said of the disciples, "They are filled with

new wine.” (In other words, they were drunk.) But not one of them came to faith in Jesus Christ because of these signs.

What did change things? What brought people to faith and strengthened the Church? It wasn't just that the disciples were given the miraculous power to tell the mighty works of God in various languages of the day. Things changed when Peter stood up with the Eleven and began speaking. He spoke the very Word of God and then he explained it. In other words, Peter preached a sermon of which we only have the first part in our text for today. The rest is in the following verses of Acts 2.

In his sermon, Peter quotes from the Scriptures (his text, if you will), the prophet Joel and acknowledges the miraculous signs which they had just seen. He doesn't deny them, but he doesn't dwell on them either. He says they are sign of the last days which were ushered in by the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

He then goes on to preach nothing but Christ. He speaks of Jesus being “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.” Peter speaks of the people's sin. He doesn't deny it or just deliver a message of “Smile! Jesus loves you!” Peter reminds them that they crucified and killed Jesus, but God raised Jesus back to life again. He urges repentance and baptism for the remission of sins.

The result? While a sermon might not seem to be very flashy, it was very effective. Verse 41 says, “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” So, through the preaching of the Word of God and the administration of Holy Baptism, the Church of God grew greatly and was strengthened superbly.

What does this mean for us today? Many people today, including some active church goers, are desperately seeking an experiential religion. They think that miraculous manifestations of the Spirit's power or the emotional high of Spirit filled worship are the ways to bring people to Christ and

make His Church grow and become strong. Many will think that we must update what we do and how we do it to make it more attractive to people so that they will want to join the Church.

What happens when flashiness becomes the standard for measuring our spiritual activities? It will be just like the first Pentecost. It will be met with amazement, perplexity, and scoffing. Some people will be amazed by such things and might associate themselves with Christ and His Church until the spiritual high wears off. Others will be perplexed by what they see and hear and never knowing what to make of it. Many will scoff at what passes for the Christian experience as it is portrayed in Christian music and television.

The answer here is the same answer as on the original day of Pentecost: preaching the Word of God. And the way of preaching the Word of God is the same as the day of Pentecost. Preaching the Word of God is preaching Christ. It is not merely the sharing of information about Christ's work, but the application of the benefits of Christ's work for us. Our sinful self wants the flash of power and the excitement of experience, but not the nitty gritty of the Gospel. It's like eating cake for breakfast, rather than a healthy meal. You desire it and it tastes good, but, if that's all you have to eat, it's not healthy or good for you.

Preaching the Word of God begins with diagnosing our main problem. The problem is not about lack of feeling or lack of enjoyment, but it is the power of sin. The power of sin alienates us from God, not weakness. Sin condemns us to death, not lack of power.

Preaching the Word of God also provides the solution. It tells us of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. The Word of God tells of Christ's work of living perfect in our place. It tells that, although our sin condemned Jesus to die, that was done with God's knowledge and it happened as part of His plan to forgive our sin. The Word of God tells us that God raised Him from the dead as part of His plan to give us life that transcends the grave and lasts forever.

However, preaching the Word of God is not merely informing us of God's plan or teaching us about what Jesus has done. The Word of God is the Holy Spirit's tool for applying the benefits of

Christ's actions to each of us personally. The Word of God is a conduit of God's love and forgiveness. It is the source of new life and life after death.

Preaching the Word of God with all the severity of the Law and all the sweetness of the Gospel is the one and only thing which will create faith in people, give forgiveness of sin to people, provide life-changing life to people, and raise people from the dead to life everlasting. Therefore, by the Spirit's power, we preach the Word of the God constantly, consistently, boldly, and without fear in order that the Spirit's power might be unleashed in our world and in our congregation to call people to faith, bring people into the safety and security of His Church and, when they are here, to strengthen and keep them here.

Does that mean we deny the miraculous or reject the emotional? Not at all. We acknowledge the miraculous and embrace the emotional. Both of those are good things, but they are not and never can be the source of the Spirit's power to convert people to faith or strengthen them in faith. Only the Word of God can do that.

If you want the power of the Holy Spirit as it was distributed on the first day of Pentecost, don't look for it in miracles. Don't look for it in experience. Focus your attention on the Word of God and the Sacraments which not only declare God's actions toward us in Christ Jesus, but convey the benefits of Christ's action: His love, His forgiveness, His life.

Hear the Word of God yourselves. Read the Word of God. Heed the Word of God. Teach the Word of God to your children. As one ancient prayer said of the Scriptures, "grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them."

Then we will declare the Word of God in our homes, to our friends, and, through the pastor and our church, to the community and the World. The power of the Holy Spirit will then be seen, not in rushing winds, tongues of fire, miraculous events, or emotional highs, but in people coming to faith, people coming to Church, and people coming to eternal life.

While looking for a picture for the bulletin cover, I found one that should a flame of fire with the words, "Send the fire again." It seemed to imply that the power we need (and are somehow lacking) for our Pentecost celebration and the ministry of our church is contained in the visible sign of the tongues of fire. That's not true. We already have the power of Pentecost in our midst. Don't be fooled by the flashy and seek the Spirit's power apart from where and how He has promised to give it. Seek the less exciting, but eminently more effective means by which the Spirit's power is unleashed: the speaking of the Word, the application of the Water, and the consuming of the Bread and the Wine. *There* is the power of Pentecost. Amen.