

Sermon for Day of Pentecost
May 11, 2008

Scriptures: Acts 2:1-21
John 7:37-39

“Water, Wind, and Fire”

If you were to begin reading the book of Acts, starting with chapter one, and continuing through chapter two, you could hardly help but notice the astonishing change that takes place in chapter two, verse two. Nothing prepares us for it.

Everything in chapter one is quite recognizable to Presbyterians. After Jesus has ascended into heaven, the disciples return to Jerusalem, and establish an orderly and somewhat secluded community life devoted to prayer. They take care of business matters in a decent and orderly fashion, replacing Judas with Matthias. The leadership of the group is thereby restored to the required number, and the minutes are approved. Things seem to be proceeding in a most orderly manner right up through verse one of chapter two.

Suddenly pandemonium breaks forth! Sounds overwhelm the room. Tongues of fire reach out to seize persons. Though their speech is intelligible to some, it is definitely not the speaking to which they are accustomed. The walls of their gathering place cannot contain either the people or the Spirit that moves them. They are thrust into the public arena, and the idyllic scene of order and safety is absolutely shattered.

I found myself wondering this week what kind of card one might send for Pentecost, what kind of flowers might we give? As the third major festival of the Christian year, it is intriguing that

Pentecost has been ignored by FTD and Hallmark. I suspect it is because of the disquieting nature of this day; it cannot be contained in safe, concrete, sentimental images so necessary to the domestication and secularization that have befallen Christmas and Easter. This day brings us perilously close to fanaticism, and thus frightens us.

But it is where we were born; it is where the church came into being, and if we are going to fulfill our destiny, we must understand the nature of our beginning, and the direction we are propelled by it.

Israel traced its beginning to Mt. Sinai and two stone tablets. Stone tablets are about as orderly and concrete as you can get – God’s will written in stone. The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, the Mormons, trace their origin to gold tablets given to Joseph C. Smith. Here again, they have a definite, unambiguous foundation upon which to build: direct knowledge miraculously given by God.

We Christians, on the other hand, trace our origins to a human being who left no writings, no monuments, and promised that we would be led by a Spirit who is described in terms of water, wind, and fire. Water, wind, and fire – did you ever try to hold any of these in your hand? You don’t get very far. Water, wind, and fire can’t be easily picked up and set in a definite place. To control them is to destroy them. Water which does not flow becomes stagnant. Fire which is contained dies. The wind ceases when walls are erected.

It is like that with the Spirit. The Spirit is not ours to control, but rather to discern and follow. To try to control the Spirit is to destroy the Spirit’s effectiveness, which is in large part dependent upon the Spirit’s freedom. Jesus speaks of the Spirit blowing where it will. Paul speaks of the varieties of the gifts of the Spirit,

manifested in many different ways among God's people, but all from the one Spirit. Our only hope of being formed into God's new people who demonstrate a new way of living to our world is in this freedom of the Spirit to call us to new ways and new thoughts, new language.

Today we welcome youth who are making a public profession of their faith as a confirmation of their Baptism. They bring to us gifts with which the Spirit has blessed them. They bring understandings of God and the world which may not always neatly conform to our viewpoints. The challenge for them and us, if they are to truly become active members of this community of faith, is to respectfully listen together for the Spirit's wisdom and guidance, recognizing that the promise of our Baptism and the promise of Pentecost is that the Spirit will speak through each of us. Not perfectly, but persistently.

These whom we confirm today, inherit structures of faith and practice, which we have sought to teach them during this past year. The Holy Spirit has led in the development of those teachings. We hope that these youth have an informed understanding of the faith we pass on. We also hope that the Holy Spirit will lead these youths to breathe renewed life into those pathways to which we have introduced them. We pray that they will be led by the Spirit to keep our waters fresh and lively, to blow into corners that have become stuffy and stale, to burn with zeal where it is lagging among us.

Our traditions are important and deserve to be honored; they will be honored as they are reinvigorated and reinterpreted, renewed and reformed for each new day and time. That is the work of the Spirit, to call the young to dream dreams, and the older to envision.

On that first Pentecost the church was set loose in the world with a fervor that could not be contained. Today we confirm a new class of our youths with the fervent hope that they will not simply settle

into all our ways, but that they will be led by the Spirit to call us to some new ways of speaking and loving and serving our Lord and Savior.

Come. Holy Spirit, enliven us, renew us, propel us, blow, burn, refresh that Christ's church might live.