

“Mission Shaped Church”

Finding Our Place in God’s Mission

Acts 2:1-13

Pentecost

May 23, 2021

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“And the rush of a mighty wind came upon them...”

Acts 2:2

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, pour out your Spirit on all flesh and upon us that we may hear your word and find our place in your mission. In Christ’s name, we pray: Amen.

Message

A couple weeks ago was Mother’s Day. I don’t know how you celebrated Mother’s Day, but I would imagine that it involved sending a card or note to someone. In a few more weeks, we will be celebrating Father’s Day and, again, it might involve sending a card. I sure that Hallmark will make a little “extra charge” on this special day too!

But it is not just Father’s Day and Mother’s Day, is it? A few weeks ago, we had Administrative Assistant’s Day where we celebrated those who work in offices. Not to mention other special days like Grandparent’s Day and Children’s Day, Teacher Appreciation Day and National Principal’s Day, Boss’s Day and National Pet Day, to name a few more. With all these special days, Hallmark seems to have done an amazing job at marketing.

But what of the holy days? Obviously, there is Easter and Christmas, which include some of the busiest times of the year for sending cards. In fact, did you know that we send 60% or all greeting cards between Thanksgiving and Christmas? Valentine’s Day is also very busy.

But I have another question about holy days: where are the cards that have images of fire, wind, and people speaking in other languages, cards that celebrate the birth of the church, and share expressions like “Hope you get lit up on this Day

of Pentecost” or “More Spirit Power to You!” I am not sure the stores carry such cards. If they do, would you let me know!¹

Pentecost: Forgotten?

Pentecost, which we celebrate today, is the birthday of the church, and it is one of those “holy days” we tend to forget – much like the “shy member” of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.² We can tend to overlook the power of Pentecost, and, therefore, bypass the Spirit: for how *do* we understand the creation of a new community by the Spirit, where we are to share “all things in common”? Or how do we carry out the mission of the Spirit that shares the love of God where we are able to communicate in any language the gospel to every tribe and people? Or how do we ask ourselves what the Holy Spirit is bringing about? How is God’s Spirit forming us?

Pentecost is that day when we realize that the church is more than a voluntary organization. It is that, but it is also more than that: on Pentecost, we affirm that the church is both human and divine. All too human, yes, but also a creation of God, which calls forth our response as people and asks of us: Have you received the Holy Spirit? Are you open to what the Spirit is doing? Do you want to be part of the Spirit’s mission?

If we are to consider how we are to find our place in God’s mission, then we cannot leave out the power and presence of the Holy Spirit; we cannot somehow think the mission leaves out the Spirit with us. In fact, that is the very point of our sermon: *Pentecost is the day when the Spirit creates and shapes the church for its mission.* It is the day when the Spirit comes upon the disciples and fills them with power, and moves them, and shakes and even disturbs them, into becoming a new force of transformation. That is Pentecost!

It is the event where the people who gathered in Jerusalem “from every nation under heaven” were able to communicate and understand each other in their own language (Acts 2:1-3). Indeed, as Luke tells us, the people who had “gathered in one place” were all “amazed and astonished” when the Holy Spirit came. They didn’t understand what it meant (Acts 2:12).

It is a picture of the church being born, and not everyone who is there that day gets it, as some sneer and others make fun of the disciples – a sign that the

¹ See “The Forgotten Holy Day” at www.homileticsonline.com.

² *The Forgotten Trinity*, Alasdair Heron, Editor (London, UK: Interchurch House, 1991).

Spirit is surely doing something new (Acts 2:13). So note the dynamic: not everyone receives the Spirit on Pentecost. Not everyone is about the mission. And yet, when folks are open to the mission, it is because they are open to the life of the Spirit.

It is a basic spiritual principle: that when we remain closed in our own certainties, we can frustrate the work of the Holy Spirit. When we focus on being right all the time, or when we fail to admit our brokenness or confusion – we can fail to receive the Spirit.

Pentecost: Unbound!

I sometimes wonder if this why we miss what this holy day of Pentecost is about. First, are we afraid of what the Holy Spirit might do? Yes, no? What might happen when God changes our hearts and minds? What will take place?

Second, might we have not experienced the love and forgiveness of the Spirit? After all, have we ever experienced God’s forgiving grace?

And third, maybe we have not experienced “church” where folks have “all things in common”: empirically speaking, churches are messy, after all, full of folks like us who make mistakes, get it wrong, stubborn, or who are just plain hurting. And yet, spiritual formation is about understanding how the Holy Spirit is working in all things and shaping us into becoming more and more like Jesus Christ, where we grow with others, even when we feel broken.

Look at what happened to John Wesley, whose conversion on Aldersgate Street in London we celebrate on Monday. John Wesley was one of the founders of Methodism, and after serving as a missionary in Georgia, he felt like a failure when he returned to England; his doubt lead him to despair. And it wasn’t until his heartwarming experience at Aldersgate that he began to share more fully in God’s mission of spreading holiness with enthusiasm and a sense of adventure.³

Maybe we could say that John Wesley, at that moment, learned from his own brokenness what the Spirit of Pentecost was about, and how he could share in God’s mission.

Because the mission, as Wesley and others have learned, is not simply about having more programs in the church, or being a certain kind of church like a

³ Elaine A. Heath, *God Unbound: Wisdom from Galatians for the Anxious Church* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 2016), 37.

“seeker sensitive church” or a “purpose-driven church,” a megachurch or a micro-church; and it is not about labels like “conservative” or “liberal,” or even Roman Catholic or Baptist. It is not about propping up a bureaucracy, or relying on our own powers. It is not even about maintaining “respectability.”

No, it is about something else: it is about knowing how the Spirit can transform and repair those who are broken, and forgive what is sinful, and reconcile what is separated. It is about realizing how, as broken people, we can still receive the Spirit and carry out the mission, thus helping others find their place in what God is doing and breaking through to grace!

I sometimes think churches in North America and Europe have forgotten this. Churches in these parts of the world have been used to calling the shots on how others should think or act. Maybe it is a good thing that the churches in these other parts of the world, like Asia and Africa, are now listening to the Spirit!

After all, as Jesus reminds us, the Spirit blows where it wills (John 3:8). We do *not* control where the Spirit is working or in whom the Spirit is acting. We do not possess the Spirit within these walls. As Pentecost teaches, the Spirit blows like a violent wind (Acts 2:2). We can't see it, we can't stop it, but we can see the effects of it: We can see the fruit of the Spirit where there is kindness and gentleness, self-control and peace demonstrated, and we can see the evidence of the Spirit where there is patience and faithfulness (Galatians 5:23-24). And we can see the Spirit at work where people are serving others and where there is a “breaking down of barriers” between tribes and parties (Eph. 2:9).⁴

Even more, we can see the Spirit of Pentecost at work when we trust God to provide, and in the case of our Faith-Promise Missions Giving, when we trust God with what we have – knowing that when the Spirit comes we will be able to share, giving to those as any would have need (Acts 2:42-45).

Dear church: when we find our place in God's mission, we are able to use our gifts and our passion to address the world's needs and brokenness; we are able to receive what the Spirit gives us. And if that sounds like it is eternally significant, it is! It is! And it's why we invite you now to receive the Holy Spirit and to join God's mission! Amen!

⁴ Leonard Sweet, “The Broken English of Pentecost” at www.esermons.com.