FIELDS OF DREAMS

Acts 2:1-21

May 31, 2020

Pentecost Sunday

Pentecost, (from the Greek word for “Fiftieth”), is the fiftieth day after Easter season. Next week is Trinity Sunday, and then nearly six months of what the Church calls “Ordinary Time” begins. From ten thousand feet, the Christian Year appears divided almost in half: about six months of holy seasons (Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Eastertide), and about six months of Ordinary Time. Like a pendulum swinging back and forth, or a pair of lungs breathing in and out, the church alternates between these two movements each year: high holidays and everyday life; the joys of the celebration, and the grunt work of growth.

Pentecost is the Christian reinterpretation of the ancient Jewish pilgrimage festival, the Festival of Weeks, or *Shavout,* celebrated 50 days after Passover. For the ancient Israelites, this festival was an explicitly diverse, inclusive harvest celebration. Over time, it also came to mark the reception of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. For Christians, Pentecost celebrates the reception of the Holy Spirit, and the birth of the church. Happy Birthday!

The community of disciples are gathered because of the Festival of Weeks *(Shavout).* Jesus had promised the arrival of the Holy Spirit not long after His departure – and, sure enough, on the festival day itself, the Holy Spirit arrives. The scene is spectacular and chaotic: a violent, rushing sound like wind, and then “divided tongues, as of fire--not a fire that destroys, but rather like the fire that Moses encountered at the burning bush, which was “blazing, yet was not consumed.” The Spirit’s immediate effect is linguistic: many are empowered “to speak in other languages,” so that each person hears the testimony in his or her own native language. We might think of a meeting at the United Nations, in which each person hears (through a headset) the proceedings translated into his or her mother tongue. The upshot of all of this is a sense of togetherness and unity; diverse as they are, everyone understands and can communicate. Accordingly, they’re dazzled and taken aback. “What does this mean?”

As if to answer this question, Peter stands and speaks. He cites the prophet Joel, adapting those ancient words to illuminate the present: the final and decisive chapter of history has arrived, the dawn of God’s joyous Jubilee that Jesus declared early in His ministry (check that out in Luke 4), and now the “pouring out” of the Holy Spirit upon “all flesh” as Joel had prophesied (Joel 2:28). Jesus both heralded, and, indeed, *began* this new era, and the Spirit will empower a community and through whom the movement’s message of healing, liberation, and joy will go out to the ends of the earth.

And this is nice: on one level, from a Christian perspective, these events provide a new layer of meaning for the ancient harvest festival: the Spirit comes in order to gather in the sheaves of God’s great harvest of redemption.

This festival of celebration, this Pentecost, points towards a portrait of the church as a dynamic community of people following Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry out God’s mission of healing, liberation, and joy for the sake of the world. And may I say, in this time of unrest in our country about undue police violence especially against blacks, and the fear by the police of black men that causes that violence, this community of Christ’s Holy Spirit is strikingly diverse, inclusive, and egalitarian. The Jews Peter addresses are immigrants from all over the known world (“known” to Luke at least) who now live in Jerusalem, and the Jesus movement will soon open up to include Gentiles, too. Accordingly, Luke casts the Church as a diverse, prophetic community of bridge-builders, visionaries, and dreamers, male and female, slave and free, multi-ethnic, immigrant and resident. And soon enough, this egalitarian, communitarian ethos will extend to the church’s whole interrelating: “They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Do you remember the l989 film “*Field of Dreams?*” Did you actually see it? I did, but a lot of us have just been caught by its catch-phrase: “if you build it they will come.” It was a quirky, quiet little film about an Iowa farmer who listens to the advice of that disembodied voice and builds a baseball diamond in his cornfield. It’s become a symbol of hope for thousands of people suffering from severe “dream deficiency.” *Field of Dreams* struck deep chords in the American psyche—offering a positive alternative to an American Dream that for too many has become a nightmare.

The phrase “if you build it they will come” and the notion of a “field of dreams” has moved beyond its movie roots and has entered our language as a metaphor. There are now calls for a new field of dreams for planet Earth; a new field of dreams for African Americans; a new field of dreams for America. Field of dreams has become shorthand for daring, optimism, hope . . . *futuring.*

So why do we never see or hear a call for a new field of dreams for the church? Could it be that the church, which began as a field of dreams for the outcast and outsiders, has today become such a field of boredom, a field of bafflement, a field of battlement, that a field of dreams seems outside the reach of even the highest intellect, imagination, and love?

Today is Pentecost. This is a day for remembering where the church came from, how the church came to be, and for asking what on earth the church is for, and where in heaven’s name the church is headed. This is the day when we should envision what the church could be, what its field of dreams would look like – and to start working to bring that dream to reality.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, as it happens, we don’t get to choose our starting point. When the Iowa farmer, Ray, was directed by his guiding voice to build his baseball diamond, at least he had a flat, even cornfield to work with. The church doesn’t have such nice terrain. Before we can think about construction, some really basic spade-work has to be done. There may even need to be an “attitude earthquake” before any dreams can be cultivated.

The truth is that the church – no matter how stodgy and out-of-shape she has become – is still in God’s hands. The church’s future is never predictable or plotted out, because the Holy Spirit, the animating breath of the church, blows up storms and whirlwinds without any notice.

To make the church once again into a field of dreams, we have to reclaim our Pentecostal heritage. That denomination may be right, you know. But I think Pentecostal goes way beyond what you see in their worship.

See, according to Luke/Acts, there was a period of time between Christ’s resurrection appearances to His disciples and the day when the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them. Surely those must have been days of excitement and high expectation. They waited on tiptoe for the coming Spirit of God Himself.

If you and I are to emulate those first disciples, we, too, have to stand expectantly on tiptoe. But to keep on our toes will actually require three other postures from the church:

GET ON OUR KNEES: For the church to keep on its toes, it must first get on its knees. The church has to learn how to pray together and praise together. Of course, worshiping God isn’t restricted only to church, but too often church is the last place people expect to have a religious experience. The church—this church—needs to nurture a vital piety with in its midst—strengthening its members through relationships and expectations together that are God-breathed, Christ-centered, and Spirit driven.

POUR OUT OUR HEARTS: It is easy to forget who and what the church is. Presbyterians especially have developed lots of business and busyness. But the church is not an organization we join; it’s an organism of which we are living members. You and I are living stones, as we heard just recently from St Peter. Living, moving, animated . . . creating a vital, engaged *body* of Christ. Pentecost reminds us that our purpose is to be none other than that body of Christ. To make Christ enfleshed, incarnated, embodied through a Spirit-filled community, the church has to pour out a heart filled with generous, self-sacrificing love.

SPREAD OUR WINGS: So, thirdly, the church has to be willing to trust the Spirit. We can’t take flight under our own power. But we can prepare for the flight of a lifetime. As Peter Pan said, to soar “all it takes is faith and trust, and a little bit of pixie dust. The dust is a positive must!”

So as Christians we can provide the faith and trust, while still admitting that only God can supply the miraculous “dust” of the Spirit.

See, the church has let reason and rationalism dictate our course of action for too long. Lacking in faith and trust we have instead opted for predicting every contingency and answering every imaginable question before daring to step forward. But an old rabbinic saying suggests that “if there is not more than one explanation to an event, then it is not God.”

At its heart, this is what building a church that is a “field of dreams” takes – the willingness to spread our wings and step off the edge, believing that the breath of the Spirit will breathe us forward into the future . . . GOD’S future.

Amen.