

Getting Ready for Pentecost

John 14:15-21

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Two weeks from today on June 4th we celebrate one of three major feast days on the Church calendar. Pentecost was the day when the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles to begin gathering in the members of Christ's mystical body on earth into the Church. Unlike Advent before Christmas and Lent before Easter, for some reason there's no designated season for getting ready for Pentecost.

Maybe that's why the Spirit comes and goes without notice.

In the opening chapters of Luke's Book of Acts, we read that immediately after the Spirit visited the twelve they spilled out into the streets of Jerusalem. Before hand, they remained in the Upper Room in constant prayer so they'd be ready when the Spirit arrived. At that moment they were empowered to carry on where Jesus left off and Luke reports three thousand were converted and baptized.

"Awe and wonder came upon everyone because many signs and wonders were being done by the apostles...Day by day... the apostle spent much time together in the temple... praising God and having the goodwill of the people." (Acts 2:43; 46-47.)

Unlike back then, today we live in a secular culture. Fewer people are being added to the membership of the Church. That reality makes us long for the day when the Holy Spirit will again sweep through our neighborhoods to duplicate the amazing revival experienced of that first Pentecost.

According to Luke, the Spirit showed up only fifty days after Easter. Today we ask, how long must we wait for before the Holy Spirit energizes us? The key word here is wait. Wait, wait, wait, most of life is spent waiting for what we want to happen.

Waiting is a recurring theme in both the Old and New Testaments. The Hebrews waited four hundred years before being liberate from slavery in Egypt. After their liberation, they waited another forty long years in the wilderness before returning home to the Promised Land. When they settled in, they waited forever to become the greatest nation on the face of the earth instead of being a blessing to all the nations of the earth.

Catch the difference?

After a thousand years of ups and downs, when the nation was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BC, they waited another sixty long years in exile before they could return home to Jerusalem to restore the temple, the holy ground connecting heaven to earth.

Then they waited another six hundred years before the promised Messiah finally appeared on the scene. And when he finally came, what did they do? They rejected him!

Except for their four hundred years of slavery in Egypt, most of their waiting was longer than it had to be. It wasn't because God wasn't ready to set things right. It was because they weren't ready to set things right.

Whenever we hurt, physically, emotionally or spiritually, we instinctively pray for God's help. The problem is we expect the help we want instead of the help we need. We want God to fix things on our terms.

For instance, you have a relationship problem. You expect the other person to come to her senses without realizing maybe you're part of the problem. All the blame is piled on the other. Unless you realize you need straightening out too, your prayers will continue to go unanswered because you're not praying for the right thing. It's better to start praying for self awareness that leads to repentance that leads to reconciliation with God and your neighbor.

It's this lack of self-awareness keeping us waiting for God longer than necessary.

In Old Testament times, the political and religious leaders of Israel did this all the time. They rejected the prophets, God's truth tellers, sent to show them how to set things right. More times than not, the members of the establishment wouldn't or couldn't grasp the notion that their hardships were actually self inflicted wounds. They wanted justice and peace for themselves without wanting justice and peace for others.

Read the Gospels. Despite being with Jesus for three years, the disciples carried on this tradition of being out of sync. Despite Jesus' mentoring, they still didn't get it. They quarreled among themselves about who was the greatest in God's kingdom. They didn't support and comfort Jesus when he told them he was going to Jerusalem to be crucified for the sins of the world. They even tried to talk him out of it for selfish reasons.

Towards the end, when Jesus asked them to keep awake and pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane just before his arrest, they fell asleep. When temple guards came for Jesus, they deserted him. When they heard Jesus was raised from the dead, they doubted the women's testimony.

It's fortunate for us all the disciples' failures are documented in the gospels. When we look at them we see a mirror reflection of ourselves. Unfortunately, even for us, disregarding God's divine plan is not the exception but the norm.

However, in the Book of Acts we find a big turn around. After Pentecost, following God's plan became the norm, not the exception. Reading the narrative, you can sense the dramatic change in the disciples. Finally, Jesus' teachings took hold and the credit goes to the Holy Spirit.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus said, "If you love me you will keep my Commandments and I will ask the father and he will give you another advocate to be with you forever. This is the spirit of truth... you know him because he abides with you and he will be in you." (John 14: 15-17.)

Jesus called the Holy Spirit, "another advocate," knowing he is the other advocate. Having two advocates in our corner should be comforting.

Our Advocates are both a friendly presence, standing by us and when necessary standing up for us. Think of an attorney defending you in the court room.

The Holy Spirit campaigns on our behalf, helping us work out our salvation and stand firm in times of trouble. The Holy Spirit especially supports our cause when we commit to being one of the laborers in God's kingdom.

But before we can stand firm on anything we need guidance to discern our role in God's kingdom. The Holy Spirit searches our hearts and minds, confirming our strengths and weaknesses, what makes us passionate, what leaves us cold and the wisdom to tell the difference.

Once we connect our gifts and talents to our passions, the way is clear to discern what particular ministry God has already equipped us for. Teaching, healing, spiritual friendship, being a prophetic voice? These are some of the necessary roles God offers. Choosing the right one, we can then do our part to usher in the kingdom. But not everyone answers the call. Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few." (Luke 10:2)

Jesus knew all too well, when the call comes to do something important for God, not everyone steps out from the crowd and says, "Here I am Lord, send me."

Earlier I said we waste a lot of time waiting for God to do our bidding until we admit we got it all backwards. We should be doing God's bidding. Pentecost was the great turning point in the lives of Peter and the others because they stopped insisting it was all about them and finally admitted it's all about God.

I think that's what happened on Pentecost. The Holy Spirit moved the disciples from point A to point Z by turning them upside down and inside out. Now they could see people and situations from a totally different perspective with new eyes.

In the Upper Room after Jesus announced for the the Holy Spirit was coming, he also said not everyone would welcome the Spirit.

"This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you and he will be in you." (John 14:17)

This teaching underscores the tension between the world system we created and the kingdom God created. The two don't mix because the values and priorities of the world and the Kingdom are in opposition to each other.

It took the Spirit's arrival on Pentecost to drive this point home. Up until then, the disciples had a hard time telling the difference between the values of the world's values and the ways of the God's kingdom. Yes, they heard Jesus teachings about the last being first on the first being last but they didn't take it seriously. How else can you explain their quarreling about who'd be the greatest in the kingdom of God just days before Good Friday?

Likewise, without the spirit's guidance even Christians blend to without realizing it. How many times have we confused patriotism with discipleship? Why do some put the law of the land over Christ's law of love? Why do nations claim God as their personal mascot and not the Lord of all the nations? Why is economic prosperity seen as a sign of God's favor while other people's poverty is explained away as proof of God's judgement?

Jesus said, "If you love me you will keep my Commandments." Certainly Jesus was referencing the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai, but remember how he summed up all the laws and commandments in the simple phrase, "Love God... your neighbor and yourself." Jesus was more interested in the spirit of law than the letter of the law. The power of his love permeating the universe trumps anything the world system could come up with. Seeking first the kingdom of God and all its righteousness alone it enhances the quality of life as individuals and societies. For the past two thousand years we still don't always get it right.

That's why we need the Holy Spirit Post to comfort us and challenge us to do the right thing, even when it costs us something.

May I suggest something? For the next couple of weeks before Pentecost Sunday, take time every day to read Luke's history of the early church and how they got it right. While waiting for the Holy Spirit they prayed, not forgot to hurry up consent spirit immediately. They pray for themselves to hurry up and be ready for when the Holy Spirit blew them away like a mighty wind and changed everything.

Just as the disciple spent all that time in the Upper Room in intense prayer go home to your upper room and do likewise, not just for your own sakes but especially for people as lost and confused as you who need someone like you to make a difference in their lives. That's why God put us here, to make a lasting difference by doing our part to usher in the kingdom of God into our broken world.