

Welcome to Pentecost—our tenth Pentecost together as Grace Covenant Church. Everything this year has that special flavor, doesn't it? As we pass each milestone in the church year, we are reminded that we have been here before; and we can look back and reflect on our journey together even as we look forward and ask ourselves about the shape our faithfulness will take in days to come.

Pentecost literally means the "fiftieth day." In the Jewish faith it refers to the Festival of Weeks and marks the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai some fifty days after Passover. On the Christian calendar, it falls fifty days after Easter and ten days after the Ascension of Christ. Reminiscent of the Exodus story, Luke's account in Acts of the Christian Pentecost incorporates the elements of wind and fire, ancient symbols of God's presence, as Luke speaks of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon those gathered in Jerusalem. Pentecost is often called the "birthday of the church," the point from which the church, newly empowered by God's Spirit, moves out of its hiding place in the upper room to proclaim the good news throughout the world in word and deed.

Tom Long, professor of preaching at Emory and one of the outstanding preachers of our day, recalls the experience of seeking to pass on the meaning of Pentecost in a small church he pastored many years ago. Brand new to the pastorate, he extended to his congregation an invitation to a new class on the basics of the Christian faith. Inviting both old and young, those new to the faith and those merely interested in a refresher course, he walked into the class the first Sunday morning to greet the throngs who would take him up on his offer—a throng of three little girls. Seeking to hide his disappointment, he set about his task over the next several weeks. The week before Pentecost Sunday, he asked them, "Do you girls know what Pentecost is?" They didn't. So, he went on, "Well, Pentecost was when the church was seated in a circle and tongues of fire came down from heaven and landed on their heads and they spoke the gospel in all the languages of the world." Two of the little girls took his words rather calmly, but the eyes of one little girl grew as large as saucers. When she could finally speak, she said, "Reverend Long, we must have been absent that Sunday!" "The beautiful thing," Long observed was not that she had misunderstood. The beautiful thing was that she thought it "could have happened in our church, that God's Spirit could have come even to our little congregation and given us a word to speak that the world desperately needs to hear" [Day 1, May 27, 2012].

The little girl had grasped something incredibly important about Pentecost as well as something incredibly important about the meaning of faith. Rightly observed, Pentecost is always something more than a backward look. It is an awakening to the world that surrounds the church at any given moment and a response to God's call to bear faithful witness in light of what it sees. "Pentecost," Luther Seminary Professor David Lose insists, "didn't just happen once, a long, long time ago." Pentecost happens again and again. In Christian scriptures Pentecost happens repeatedly as continuing encounter with God's Spirit awakens the church to a new understanding of the wide reach of its mission. In Acts alone, Pentecost occurs over and over again. It happens, for example, as Philip baptizes an Ethiopian Eunuch, as Paul is converted from being the church's chief persecutor to becoming its chief missionary, and as Simon Peter, learning that God is no respecter of persons, enters the living room of Cornelius, a Roman centurion.

Beyond scripture, Pentecost has unfolded in the church's progression from one continent to another and in the rise of the Protestant Reformation, the spread of the Great Awakening, the birth of Nazi Germany's Confessing Church, and the church's unfolding witness in its work for racial justice. Pentecost has also happened on a smaller scale as countless congregations have stepped forward over the millennia to open their doors to previously excluded neighbors and to speak up on behalf of the rights and needs of the poor and marginalized. Pentecost unfolds, in other words, as our understanding of the wide reach of God's love unfolds and the wind of God's spirit blows us where it will.

Today's text focuses our attention on what Fred Craddock calls "the softer side of Pentecost" [Cherry Log Sermons, 66]. If we are made nervous by all of Luke's talk about wind and fire and tongues and if we are given to less demonstrative celebrations of the Spirit than we may have encountered in some of our neighbors, we may find ourselves more comfortable with the smaller, quieter version of Pentecost in John's Gospel. Often, however, we miss it as such. We are so set on caricaturing John's account as the story of *doubting* Thomas that we miss the grace with which it unfolds. As John tells it, the day had begun in darkness. "While it was still dark," Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and discovered the dawning light of Easter. The day progressed and as the failing light of evening surrounded them, the disciples slid back into the shadows of uncertainty and sequestered themselves behind locked doors in the upper room "for fear," John says, "of the Jews." Jesus came and stood among them, breathing peace and commissioning them to take up his unfinished work.

Preachers have waxed long and hard on Thomas's ineptitude. How dare he to doubt? How dare he to ask for a sign? In the heat of our righteous indignation, we have failed to take account of a significant point in John's story. Not just Thomas, but each of the disciples find their way to the resurrection with some difficulty. Mary Magdalene's initial despair before the empty tomb is turned aside only when Jesus speaks her name. The "disciple whom Jesus loved" came to the empty tomb and "saw and believed." The ten disciples in the upper room at the end of the day, saw Jesus' hands and sides and rejoiced. The light of resurrection dawned at different times and in different ways according to the personalities and needs of the beholders. And that was okay.

If we place Jesus rather than the foibles of Thomas at the center of the story in the upper room, we encounter a story that is full of hope and promise not just for the disciples and Thomas, but for us. Jesus meets each of the disciples in terms of where they are, not where they ought to be. He does not come judging. He does not reprimand them for their little faith. He extends himself to meet their need. Just as he spoke Mary's name earlier in the day so that she might recognize him, he shows his hands and side to the ten gathered on Easter night and then again to Thomas a week later. His words of grace in that moment extend even to us: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Far from having to distance ourselves from the questions of life, far from having to feel guilty that we were not born into a full blown, perfect faith, far from having to feel guilty for who we are and what we are not, we encounter in this Christ a God of grace who invites us still. Rather than hiding in the shadows from one who will condemn us, we gather up our questions, our weaknesses, our hopes and aspirations and trust them in the service of one who breathes peace in the midst of turmoil.

Ten years ago without knowing all of the turns the coming years would take, we came together to give birth to the small community of grace known as Grace Covenant Church. We had encountered experiences in the church that had discouraged many of us about the prospects of being church. We were not absolutely sure of all that we believed; and when it came time to write our covenant, we were sure we did not want to weight it down with rigid statements of orthodoxy over which we could spend the succeeding years arm wrestling. As a consequence, our covenant is heavily weighted toward the ways we will treat one another and our sense of responsibility toward the world in which we live. "We will cast our vision," we say as we come to the covenant's end, "to the ends of the earth in celebration of the universal presence, love, and revelation of God to the whole human family."

It reminds me of the story I heard several years ago from someone who had come back from a mission trip to Africa. While there, the ministry team entered a remote village and went with a local pastor to his "church"—the shade of a tree on the edge of the village. Nailed to the tree was a roughly fashioned sign with the bold message: "_____ (the name of the village) Church: Center for World Evangelization."

Our vision and the vision of the universal church of which we are a part can be no less; and I am speaking here, of course, of something more than beating people over the head until they mouth our words and submit to our labels. I am speaking of the creative energies awakened by our encounter with a living and merciful God. I am speaking of the awakening awareness that compels us to a love as wide as the love of God. Such a vision outstrips our size, our resources, our ingenuity; and it is a vision that challenges and bids us forward still.

So, welcome to Pentecost! In our short ten years we have encountered Pentecost at a number of richly surprising and interesting turns. Where, I ask you, will we meet it next?