



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – May 11, 2008 The Invincible, Invisible Church
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Acts 2:1-21

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave ability. 5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." 14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. 19 And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. 20 The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. 21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"

The festival of Pentecost is the birthday of the church. That ought to be a pretty big deal, but if you think about it, Pentecost is the neglected step-sister of Christian festival days, hardly a rival for Christmas or

Easter or even Epiphany. You might even say Pentecost is the Rodney Dangerfield of Christian celebrations. You remember Dangerfield: his signature line was, "I don't get no respect," as in "I don't get no respect, even my yo-yo wouldn't come back to me."

Think about it. When was the last time you gathered the family for Pentecost Dinner, got a day off from work to celebrate Pentecost, or even just sent somebody a Pentecost card? Pentecost gets no respect.

Maybe the problem is the tag line: "Pentecost: Birthday of the Church." Plenty of people are ambivalent about the church; many have reason to be. Like any human institution, the church must by definition be prone to the usual suspects of human foibles and limitations. When we fallen human beings gather in churches we will inevitably produce fallen churches.

In fact, when you put it that way, it kind of makes you wonder how Pentecost ever qualified as a holy festival at all. If all we're celebrating is a long enduring, widely-shared human institution, why would we ever put Pentecost in a class with Christmas, when God's word became flesh and dwelled among us, or with Easter, when God conquered sin and death by raising His Christ from the dead?

To put the point more sharply, think back to the event we're celebrating. A tiny knot of bedraggled believers took refuge in a nondescript walk-up, in an unremarkable neighborhood, of a dusty provincial capital, in the hinterlands of the Roman Empire. Twelve poor, fickle, uneducated, disciples huddled in an upper room, praying and preaching with 120 or so followers. There was nothing about either the participants or the setting that suggested anything more momentous than a sad vigil for the end of a pie-in-the-sky dream.

Yes, they were following Jesus' orders to wait in Jerusalem, but how long would they obey Jesus now that He was gone? Yes, they were praying, but this was

the crowd that hadn't even been able to stay awake in Gethsemane while Jesus prayed. Yes, they emerged to form the beginnings of a church, but how many thousands of better educated, better funded, better organized religious movements has the world shrugged off over the millennia?

Oh, like any determined collection of religionists, they might have screwed up their courage and done all kinds of visibly churchy things. They might have formed committees, raised moneys, built buildings, sent out missionaries and done all kinds of good works, but their well-intended, temperate, human works would have sagged soon enough under the usual weight of human inconstancy, self-centeredness, and temptation.

No, if all that was at stake on Pentecost was whether Peter and the team decided to start up a little competition for the local synagogue, we probably would have long since forgotten the date. If Pentecost means only the birthday of the visible church, the birthday of human resolve to start the church, the birthday of stewardship campaigns and committee meetings and annual reports and all the other visible churchy things we do, we would have modest reason to celebrate indeed. But of course, there was something more at stake that day than a new church start up, and there was something more going on than mere human good intentions and undertakings.

What was at stake was nothing less than the age-old struggle between good and evil. Martin Luther was thinking of this struggle when he wrote our most famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Luther saw it as an eternal struggle between God and Satan: "For Still our ancient foe, doth seek to work us woe – his craft and pow'r are great, and armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal."

I know that many of you reject that kind of language because you're no longer comfortable with images of a mighty, white-bearded God wrestling with a red guy with horns and a split tail. But that's no reason to reject the notion of the eternal conflict as well. If God is the power of love, reconciliation and peace, the ground of all being in creation, then picture the adversary as the power of enmity, alienation, and anxiety, the chaos that tears at all being in creation.

Now, the outlines of the struggle become clear: God places Adam and Eve into a garden of peace and communion, but enmity tempts them with hubris and independence. God reconciles in covenant with Noah, but alienation precipitates the catastrophe of the tower of Babel and the divisive confusion of human languages. God comes among us as Jesus, but anxiety drives the Sanhedrin and Pilate to crucify him. The conflict between the power of love and enmity, between reconciliation and alienation, between peace and anxiety has been going on throughout recorded history. And, I would suggest, if you examine the data of your own life, you will find the conflict there as well.

We Christians celebrate Easter Sunday as the day of God's signal victory in this struggle. The Resurrection stands for God's ultimate triumph over all the powers of death. But just how does that victory get worked out around the world and across time? How does Christ's power and message of love get carried throughout human existence? That's what's at stake at Pentecost. If Easter is God's definitive D-Day victory, then Pentecost is God's Normandy break out.

And now we also see how so much more was going on at Pentecost than the visible human efforts to found a church. Martin Luther used to mark a clear distinction between the visible church, the sum of all human strivings in church life, and the invisible church, the human project of church blessed and inspired by the power of God's Holy Spirit. A visible church of human praying, preaching, and singing doesn't take on the invincibility of the invisible church until God pours out God's Spirit on the congregation, until God anoints the church with God's invincible spiritual presence, until God unleashes God's spiritual powers of faith and love. That's what was going on at Pentecost: God's Spirit blessing and inspiring the human work of the disciples.

Jesus had promised the disciples that if they waited faithfully in Jerusalem they would receive "power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Pentecost is the day that promise was fulfilled.

The Spirit poured into the disciples, filling them with such creative faith and love that it was as if tongues of fire were leaping from their heads. In a single stroke they overturned the enmity of Babel, speaking in ways

that all men from all nations could now understand (Acts 2:4-11). God's love swept aside all the doubt and pain of the crucifixion and sent the disciples charging out into the street with such urgent boldness that you could only conclude that they were either filled with God's Spirit or just plain drunk (Acts 2:13). Peter shared the good news with such passionate faith that three thousand listeners stepped forward to be baptized on the spot (Acts 2:41). The believers were so seized with self-surrendering love that the walls that separated master from slave, rich from poor, and native from stranger came crashing down and they all devoted themselves to eating together, studying together, praying together, and pooling all their belongings to support those in need.

God's Pentecost breakout strategy was nothing less than the most aggressive franchising scheme in history. As the spirit-filled church overwhelmed the mighty Roman Empire and spread throughout the world, God established a spiritual franchise not just in every neighborhood, but in every soul.

And yet, God still leaves us free to decline the offer or ignore the gift. God calls each and every one of us to participate in the invincible, invisible church of God's spirit, but God leaves us free to tarry smugly in the visible church of our own making. "God cannot ravish. He can only woo," writes C.S. Lewis, and indeed, God transformed the Jerusalem Christians only when they gathered as a visible church and prayed and waited and watched for God's Spirit.

Now, in our time, it is still in the visible churches where the great game is still in play – where the power of love, reconciliation, and peace still struggles with the power of enmity, alienation, and anxiety. And it is in this particular visible church where we ask the question of our beloved church on the hill: Do *we* say "yes" or do we say "no" to God's spiritual offer? Are we merely a visible church of busy human doings, or are we also an invisible church of God's love, a spiritual community driven to faith and self-surrendering love by God's intoxicating Spirit?

The answer for our church, like for all churches everywhere, is sometimes the one and sometimes the other. We have all known moments in a beautiful Advent service, or on a Youth Sunday, or in a Bible study, or on a mission trip, or during a choir anthem

when you could just feel the whole room begin to lift off with an ecstatic sense of shared joy. But then haven't we also been in services, meetings, or dinners when a prayer or spiritual reference was just a vaguely obligatory after-thought?

We have all heard heart-melting testimonies of spiritual blessings. But then haven't we also gotten the impression that for most of us the only thing worse than having to listen to someone witness or speak in tongues would be to witness or speak in tongues ourselves?

We have all tasted the sweetness of communion with our brothers and sisters from Pivot House or the Kenyan Village Of Oloshoi-Obar. But then haven't we also seen a slightly out-of-pattern visitor languish alone in Smith Hall at coffee hour?

We have all seen wonderful acts of self-surrendering generosity. But then don't we also know that very, very few in this church even tithe much less pool all their goods for the poor?

What are we then? We are a gathering of Christians straddling two worlds in an in-between time: we've each got one foot in the secular, material world in which we've been raised, and one foot in the spiritual world to which we've been called. God knows all this, and God offers us the story of Pentecost as a vivid picture of the world to which we're called, an alluring picture to draw us to God's offer. God wants to make New Canaan Congregational an anointed church, an invisible church, a church of souls aflame.

God wants to breathe God's transforming Spirit into our services, our meetings, our studies, our missions, our songs. God wants to move us along, here in halting steps, there in leaps and bounds, toward that community, generosity, and enthusiasm that broke out in Jerusalem when the Spirit came to town. That possibility, that reality, and that offer resound in the Pentecost story.

And God knows it's hard for us simply to accept God's offer, trustingly to grasp God's hand. What can we do when we feel the grip of worldly busyness, prudence, and self-consciousness choking off the spiritual warmth of our church? We can remember Pentecost. We can remember the disciples patiently, persistently praying,

waiting and watching in the upper room for the promised Spirit. And then we can pray, and wait, and watch like them.

What can we do when we feel God's spiritual call bumping up against our famous New England reserve, our oh-so-reasonable manners, our penchant for prudent calculation? We can remember that the war between the power of love, reconciliation, and peace and the power of enmity, alienation, and anxiety is far from over and that our souls and the souls of our children and grandchildren hang in the balance. We can remember that if the Spirit had so little octane that even you and I could control it, it would lack the kick necessary to power us home. We can remember we may look like fools falling for God's crazy, intoxicating love, but the lesson of Pentecost is that only then will our sons and daughters prophesy. Only then will our young men see visions and our old men dream dreams. Only then will everyone who calls on the name of the Lord be saved.

Pentecost is the birthday of the church. It's a big deal. Happy Birthday. **Amen.**

1 C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 39.