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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Pentecost Sunday
May 27, 2007

Acts 2.1-21
Romans 8.14-17

Led By The Spirit

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” —Romans 8.14-17

Let us pray: In all that we say and do, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. (Congregation is seated.)

I don't remember hearing too much about Pentecost when I was growing up in the church. The whole church calendar was a bit of a blur. I remember Easter, of course, and Lenten potluck dinners at church—those I remember *very* fondly. And I remember Advent, which was sort of a big, extended Christmas season. We had a workshop early in Advent that was always fun. I can still remember the snowman ornament that I made at one of those workshops—it was built around a tube of Wint-O-Green lifesavers. It took great self-discipline not to eat my creation!

But Pentecost? I'm pretty much drawing a blank. It just wasn't on our radar. And I don't think my UCC church in Seattle was unusual in this regard. In the

period of late American Christendom, Pentecost wasn't a holy day that connected much with our reality. American Protestant churches were strong and confident institutions, still basking in the glow of post-war membership growth and enjoying new, modern additions to their buildings. Its members were upwardly mobile middle class citizens who were enjoying a higher standard of living than their parents and yet still comfortable with the values of right and wrong they learned growing up in the church. God was present, to be sure, but mostly as an *assumption* underneath it all. The institution was about God. God was seen as the architect of the institution. Everyone knew that, so there was no need to be too “showy” or “exuberant” in our faith. That we could leave to the “holy rollers,” who, quite frankly, made us a bit nervous and—perhaps not uncoincidentally—lived in different neighborhoods than we did.

Things were solid and comfortable—a far cry of the situation we encounter in the Pentecost story of Acts 2. In that story the followers of Jesus are not an “institution” at all. They are a rag-tag bunch of former fishermen, tax collectors, and would-be revolutionaries who suddenly found themselves bereft of the teacher who had led them for three years. Though there was talk of resurrection and new life, it was far short of consensus on that point. They didn't have building. They didn't have budgets. They were generally disorganized. When they gathered

together that day, there were serious language barriers and nobody had anticipated the need for translators.

Into that messy conglomeration God decided to speak and to offer the gift of the Holy Spirit. The speaking was done through Peter, a man of heretofore rather wavering faith. The Holy Spirit came as flames and offered the gift of understanding—people of disparate languages were able to comprehend one another and to praise God together. It started out as a real mess and ended up...well...it was still pretty messy...I guess we'd call it a holy mess. It was holy because the Spirit was present. And, ultimately, that's all we need to remember from the day the Christian Church was born: When the Spirit of God is present, the church exists—regardless of its human, worldly, architectural, or historical trappings.

The church that I described from my childhood is still quite familiar to many of us here this morning. To others it may seem like something from a distant time—more the stuff of “McGuffy’s Readers” than of “That 70’s Show.” But whatever our vantage point, it is quite clear that the confident, organized, homogeneous church of the mid twentieth century is a thing of the past. We are now a much more mixed group of people. We speak different languages of faith. We have former Roman Catholics, people from churches my parents would have

considered “holy rollers,” people with no church background but with a deep spiritual hunger. Instead of the “perfect” American family with 1.8 children and a dog, we have a mix—traditional families, singles, same sex couples, divorced people, remarried people, and even something new called “spiritual singles”—people who are married, but attend church by themselves because their spouse (and perhaps their children) aren’t really interested. Our church, like most of its sister churches in the valley, has had some financial hiccups. We aren’t as confident as we once were. The well-oiled machine of our boards and committees, with their 150+ members is squeaking a bit and making other funny noises associated with friction. We look very different than the Christendom ideal.

You know what is strange, though? We may look different from my childhood ideal, but we are starting to look a lot more like the Christian Church that is presented in Acts 2. Leadership roles are shifting. Spiritual talk comes in a variety of languages and from many people whose identity and experience are different from our own. And yet, here we are... “all together in one place.” For all of its unfamiliar messiness, this seems like a time when—biblically speaking—“church” might happen.

It seems that, maybe, we are ready for Pentecost in a way that we haven’t been in the recent past. Pentecost is not a great holy day for people and institutions

who “have it all together.” It is better suited for cast offs and questioners, oddballs and skeptics. It resonates with people who aren’t exactly sure about their faith and who are struggling to express it in a way that has integrity and authenticity. In a word, Pentecost is a holy day for people who *need* God, as opposed to people who are content merely *assuming* God.

The verse that speaks to me most clearly this Pentecost is this little one from Romans: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” (Romans 8.14) In this new and unfamiliar time, when our institutional momentum ceases to carry us along smoothly, we need to be led by the Spirit. No longer can we afford the luxury of traveling by our own lights. No longer can we be like stubborn “guys,” driving along, refusing to ask for help, relying on our own sense of direction. We’re lost. We need to stop, listen, and ask for directions. Our internal compasses need recalibration.

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” To be God’s children, we need to be led by the Spirit. I don’t know about you, but I find that to be a hard and confusing verse. At first it seems obvious to me: we need to get going and do what God tells us to do. But then I realize that I’ve made a subtle little shift. I’ve taken the emphasis off of God and put it back on myself. In my accidental mis-translation, the verse comes out like this: For all who follow the

Spirit of God are children of God. But it doesn't say we need to *follow*! It says we need to *be led*!

I'm not saying that following isn't important. Clearly it is. But following is a *response* to God's prior action. It is God, through the Spirit, who leads the church and inspires Christians. Our primary task is not so much tied up in doing what God wants but rather in cultivating an openness that allows us to hear, see, and feel God's leading. The Greek word that is translated as "led" (*ago*) has other connotations. It can also be translated as "brought" or "carried" or "guided" or "spend time." Think about how different this verse might sound...

- For all who are *brought* by the Spirit of God are children of God.
- For all who are *carried* by the Spirit of God are children of God.
- For all who are *guided* by the Spirit of God are children of God.

And I especially like this one:

- For all who *spend time* with the Spirit of God are children of God.¹

With all of these translations, even the original one, the emphasis is on God and upon the action of the Spirit. When we make it about us, even with the best of intentions, we twist the meaning. Scripture, time and time again, brings us back to God. Before we know what we are "supposed to do," we need to receive with joy that which God has already done.

That is why worship is at the center of the Church's life. In this Post-Christendom time, more than ever, we need to *spend time* with God in worship. We have grown too accustomed to talking: talking to the culture, making pronouncements to the government, preaching assurances and certainties to our children. The time is here for listening. The time has come to open ourselves to the Spirit to see what new things God has in store for us.

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.”

Let us pray. We thank you, Lord, that you have given us the spirit of adoption that frees us to live in faith and without fear. Amen.

¹ Or, perhaps more faithfully (and awkwardly) this would be translated: For all who are caused to spend time with the Spirit of God are children of God. (We are made to spend the time, we don't do it ourselves.) Hmmmm...