

~ *Pulpit Ponderings* ~

*June 2011*

Ever wonder why a flame is brought into the sanctuary every Sunday morning to light candles as worship service begins? And, pray tell, why is there is a vacant chair behind the pulpit?

The flame represents the Holy Spirit and as the candles are lit, symbolically, the presence of God and His Son, Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit is then upon and amongst us. The light of the candles are purely symbolic but isn't it nice to think that just as the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples on the very first Pentecost, it descends also upon us – not just on Sunday morning but every day. When His presence arrives where does He sit? Why, right behind the pulpit, of course. Now you know or, at least, you have been reminded what these represent – He is always with us. That is why we should refrain from talking/visiting with our neighbors at that time so we can get our minds and hearts in the right place for worship. Please use this time just before the service begins to prepare yourself to worship God.

As for Pentecost, unfortunately, some Christians misunderstand the event of Pentecost and what it means to the greater Church. There some who believe that the greater Church got its start when Jesus was born, or when he was baptized by John the Baptist, or when he began His ministry in the Galilee, or when he was crucified, or when he was resurrected, or . . . hopefully, I am preaching to the choir but just in case there are some here at First Church that have some confusion about the meaning of Pentecost and why it is celebrated, let me answer some often asked questions about it.

- **What is Pentecost and what difference does it make in our lives today?**

The Day of Pentecost is the occasion on which pious Jews from all over the world gathered to celebrate "The Feast of Weeks," or *Shavuot* in Hebrew and this feast was celebrated fifty days after Passover. That is why we call it *Pentecost*, which means 50. This Feast is a Jewish harvest festival (all of the first Christians were also Jews) at which first fruits were offered to God. Jesus told His disciples to wait for Him in Jerusalem after His resurrection. Being Jews, they all knew what He meant for *Shavuot* was one of the obligatory feasts that all Jews were to attend. He wanted them to wait for a miracle occurred: tongues of flame lighted on each person...**AND** each person spoke their own native tongue but, miraculously, everybody understood everybody else!

The difference it all makes in my life is that on this same day the promised gift of the Holy Spirit was given to the Church (the small Christian faith). I believe that it is that force, the Holy Spirit, that has supernaturally empowered the Church for two thousand years, kept it going, fed us, strengthened us and guides us every day.

- **Can we Christians, in fact, think of Pentecost as the "birth day" of the Church, because it was on that day that we received the gift that has made it all possible?**

Many Jews believe that the Torah was given to Moses at *Shavuot*. Symbolically, Jesus Christ is the Word, the Word brought to dwell among us, so how appropriate that the Counselor Christ promised us when He could no longer be present in the flesh with us, came on *Shavuot*. Pentecost is the Church's celebration of the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the earlier years of

Christianity, Pentecost was the third most important celebration of the Christian year. Unfortunately, modern Christianity seems to have delegated Pentecost to just another Sunday.

But Pentecost is far more important to our daily lives than that for it comes from the realization that God's very life, breath and energy lives in, with and among us. Those who are Christians experience this life through Jesus because they see the Spirit so fully manifest in him. If you attend church on Pentecost Sunday, you could most likely hear read a passage from John's Gospel (20:19-23). It tells of a visit of the Risen Christ to the disciples huddled in fear. ***“Peace be with you,”*** Jesus says. ***“As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.”*** After saying this, Jesus breathed on them and added, ***“Receive the Holy Spirit”*** – the breath, the life, of Jesus himself. We are God-breathed. Pentecost celebrates that reality.

The feast day of Pentecost remembers a day not long after Jesus' resurrection when the energy of the Spirit was poured out in power upon the Church. It was a unifying Spirit that crossed the artificial boundaries of language, race and culture. People could speak and be understood; strangers heard one another; communion happened. The Spirit breathes peace.

- **What seems to happen when people allow this divine Spirit to energize them? When we allow this are we consumed by love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness and self-control?**

First of all, we call all those feelings and emotions the ***“fruit of the Spirit.”*** They are a by-product of the Holy Spirit and they are a description of the qualities of Jesus. That's who we are and who we are to become. The celebration of Pentecost moves very naturally into the following Sunday's celebration of the Holy Trinity, the unique way that Christians describe our experience of God. We see the life of the Trinity as descriptive of the whole of reality: *God's pouring out of the divine life in self-emptying love we call the Father.* God's complete and open receiving and responding to that love we call the *Son.*

The very awareness of that flow of love between one and the other, which values it with infinite worth and bliss we call the *Spirit.* Yet all is one complete love. That's a way of thinking of God.

And that same dynamic is present in our lives, breathing us into being. For instance, I experience the Trinity and the Spirit in my relationship with Gayle. There is a love that I have and give to her, and a love that she receives and responds to by returning to me. But more than that, after almost forty years of marriage, there is something that exists between us, a reality, a Spirit of Love that sees our relationship and values it profoundly with humility and joy. Sometimes I pinch myself to be so blessed to live in such love – a love given, received, and valued. Yet it is all one love. That's breathing the Spirit of God.

Please join your Christian Brothers and Sisters of First Church as they celebrate Pentecost and the beginning of our church. This is a great opportunity to show unity in our Christian faith, Presbyterianism, and in our community as well. **Oh yes – wear something red on Sunday, June 12 – that is the color of the day!**

***May each of you be continually blessed by His grace, love, and mercy.***

***As Always – In His Grip ...***

***Shalom Aleichem (Peace Be Unto You) and Happy Pentecost Every Day of Your Life***

*Pastor Buddy*

*“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” – Isaiah 52:7*