

Redwoods Presbyterian Church

Pentecost Sunday

May 28, 2023

Rev. Keenan Kelsey preaching

Prayer for illumination Open our hearts and minds by the power of your Spirit, Holy God, that we might hear and receive the message you intend for us today. Amen.

Faith without works is dead. How often have we heard this statement? And from my point of view, how often is it used as judgement? A Condemnation, rather than an invitation? Not only is it a little stark, it seems to diminish faith itself... Faith after all, is the bedrock of our religion, Faith in God through Christ is the center of Christianity.

But I don't think that's what James intended. By the time James writes to far-flung Christian communities, he takes enduring faith for granted. What concerns him is empty faith, faith without lived practice. James fervently believes that if you don't let the Spirit in, if you don't let your faith move you and influence you, then it is a dead faith. He pleads for a faith in which right thinking compels you to right acting.

It seems to me that Pentecost must have been James' Scripture of choice He equates the second-generation Jesus followers with those insecure, unsure disciples still in hiding. Luke says there were about 120 of them – disciples who had heard Jesus command: Wait for the Spirit, wait for the right time, prepare yourselves, pray, study; but they had been waiting for nearly two months. With the Ascension, they felt even further abandoned by Jesus. Oh, these men and women believed – they prayed, but they were also afraid.

Pentecost literally means "Fifty days" because, it falls seven weeks after the opening of the harvest season, and 50 days after the Resurrection. For centuries this had been (and remains) the Jewish Festival of Weeks, the second of three festivals on which every male Jew was required to worship at the Temple (at least once in his life if not more often). It was a day to celebrate the harvest. It was also associated with the day on which Moses received the Tablets of the Law. Needless to say, it was a major holy day, and just as the Scriptures described, all of the scattered Jewish peoples gathered in Jerusalem. There were indeed many languages being spoken.

The disciples were hiding from the crowds, until they weren't.

With drama and excitement and force, suddenly those huddled to the side were propelled to the center.

Fear was gone and somehow, disciples, which means followers, became apostles, which means those sent out, leaders. Somehow, miraculously, they were able to speak and communicate their story to strangers with strange languages. The dejected followers of Jesus were suddenly bursting out of their shelter into the streets of Jerusalem, telling everyone around about what they had experienced with Jesus and what they knew to be true about the amazing life-saving power of God's love. About their Jesus and how God loves and cares about everyone, even the poorest, most marginalized, and even the most wealthy. About their Jesus and compassion in action – the justice, that he, and they, and everyone is called to and expected to live out in this world. About their Jesus and how not even the grave could stop him from caring about them – and us. And the people heard. And the people understood.

Does this sound too good to be true? I think we are supposed to be disciples that seek this. Pentecost is dramatic and fiery and uninhibited. It's like a brilliant movie scene.

But, how many of us really want to be spun around with exhilaration and passion? To be inspired to do something and be someone different, someone bold and daring who might venture forth without worrying about propriety or reason or appearances or even outcome – someone who receives and trusts the spirit so completely that nothing else matters? Not even what others may think.

Besides, our world problems are so much bigger than our ability to make a difference and frankly, our own challenges are more demanding than ever?

Why can't we just say our prayers and leave it to God?

Well, we can. We can just say our prayers and leave the rest to God. But the boldness of James would say that, like faith, Prayer without Works is dead. During our Season of Prayer, we are examining various aspects and modes and experiences of two-way communication with God. Prayer is fundamental to our faith.

What James is saying, I think, is that authentic, deeply felt prayer will compel you to action, spark an impulse to share in works of mercy and restorative justice.

Prayer may or may not change God, but like our faith itself, it certainly changes us. An alive faith, an active prayer life, most certainly will result in a new relationship and reaction with God, compelling you to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Pentecost is about this kind of prayer... prayers of justice and action. We pray for hope and peace and understanding and healing. But God says, YES, but I need you to be the sowers of hope and makers of peace and spreaders of the word and healers of the world. God says YOU are my hands and feet in this world.

It means we need to dredge up societal darkness, like child labor, inadequate wages, uneven healthcare, and the consequences of our own high rate of divorce. We need to examine why our world is filled with violence. We need to be looking at our prison system and figure out why recidivism is so high. And why a Black man can be put into prison for an offence that would be a fine for a white man.

Receiving the Holy Spirit might mean sharing our faith with someone at the office or around a dinner table or on a walk. It might mean an act of forgiveness. Or an inspiration to act boldly even though the action is unpopular or uncomfortable? Or feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick, visiting the prisoner. Or using your voice not to tout your own greatness, but to build up community?

Responding to the Spirit doesn't have to be grand. Dr. Milton Erickson tells of visiting a deeply depressed elderly woman at the request of her pastor. Noticing three beautiful, strong African violets on her kitchen counter, he challenged her, "Depression isn't your problem. Your problem is that you aren't being a very good Christian!" Before she could sputter a reply, he pointed out her talent for growing African violets. It was a gift she was keeping to herself. He told her to purchase pots and transplant leaves to grow more of these beautiful plants. When she had an adequate supply of propagated plants, he wanted

her to give them away, starting with members of her church. He left, and she bowed for her evening prayer; but her prayers seemed hollow. Instead she began to think about what the doctor had said. She decided to give it a try. She took an African violet to a friend who had recently lost her husband. Then another to a family who just had a new baby. Soon this became a regular part of her life. About ten years later, an article appeared in the local paper. It was titled, "African Violet Queen Dies – Mourned by Thousands."

Gert Behenna was a rough, big-boned woman from Alabama. She found a Higher Power through Christ after years of active and devastating alcoholism and she told her story so effectively that she became a celebrity on the Christian speaking circuit. Since she travelled exclusively by car she spent a lot of time in gas station restrooms... in private conversations, one could always count on a rampage against these dirty cubicles. They were, she said, so gross that she felt like wearing galoshes every time she entered one. It got so bad that she complained to God about the terrible inconvenience associated with driving around the country speaking on God's behalf. Then, one day, she read, "whatever you do for the least of my people, you do for me." Which was when she realized Jesus might be the next person coming in after her. So she figured she had better stop complaining and do something.

She writes: "Now, when I go into a messy restroom, I pick up all the towels and stuff them into the wastebasket. Then I take another paper towel and wipe off the sink, the mirror and the toilet seat."

Leadership Magazine had a great story about a pastor visiting a church service:

"It was one of those mornings when the tenor didn't get out of bed on the right side of the sheet music. As I listened to his faltering voice, I looked around. People were pulling out hymnals to locate the hymn being sung by the soloist. By the second verse, the congregation had joined the soloist in the hymn. And by the third verse, the tenor was beginning to find the range. And by the fourth verse, it was beautiful. And on the fifth verse the congregation was absolutely silent, and the tenor sang the most beautiful solo of his life."

Remember our second scripture reading: Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

May it be so.