**Preaching Notes for the Day of Pentecost (May 15, 2016)**

**Rev. Dr. Dawn Chesser**

**Easter Preaching Series on Baptism**

**Week 7: Pentecost**

**[Acts 2:1-21](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=141" \l "hebrew_reading)**

**Key Word: Witnesses**

This week, as we celebrate Pentecost, we come to the final and probably most familiar membership vow:

“To faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness.”

Since the word “witness” was added by an act of the 2008 General Conference and is not actually in our present hymnal, I thought it would be important to draw attention to this fact by focusing on this word, which is also very appropriate for Pentecost.

So often when congregations think of Pentecost, they associate it with the birthday of the church of Jesus Christ. They may sing “Happy Birthday” and have balloons and cake and a party atmosphere to make the day special. And while there is technically nothing wrong with celebrating the birth of the church on Pentecost, the problem with focusing *only* on Pentecost as a birthday celebration causes the day to suffer the same fate as most other birthday celebrations: It puts the focus of the day entirely on those being celebrated; that is, on those who are already members of the church.

The story of Pentecost was not told to celebrate those who were already disciples of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples who had gathered in Jerusalem as Jesus had instructed, not simply to remind them that he was still with them, but for the purpose of *empowering and equipping* them to be witnesses to the grace of Jesus Christ for those who had not yet heard the good news of his saving love for them!

Pentecost is one of the oldest feast days the church of Jesus Christ has celebrated, second in importance only to Easter as a high holy day for the early church.

This is a wonderful fact of history that we as a church need to recover and reclaim! Can you imagine if we took Pentecost as seriously as the early church did and through our celebrations said to the whole world, “Pentecost is more important than Christmas!” Because if we look to history, that is true!

Many of us lament each year that the Advent season has become for the secular world a time to prepare for Christmas primarily by shopping and decorating and baking special foods and gathering as family. The season that began for Christians as a time of penitence and reflection—a kind of “mini-Lent”—has been almost completely co-opted by secular interests, especially those generated by the retail industry.

Easter is rapidly becoming the same way. This year I was amazed by the pictures posted on social media of the piles of loot that the Easter Bunny brought to the children of some of my friends. I admit to going overboard on the Easter candy for my own children all those years, but it was never a gift-giving occasion for our family. I know this is changing though. In my local pet store, there was an Easter Bunny and a photographer in the store for weeks leading up to Easter, so families could have a picture taken with their pets sitting on the Easter Bunny’s lap. I must admit, I was a little shocked! (But not as shocked as my dog, who growled furiously at the Easter Bunny and refused to get near it.) Is Easter in danger of suffering the same fate as Christmas? Will it be mostly a secular holiday, completely co-opted by market values?

I realize in some ways I have lost my way here and “gone chasing after that rabbit” as they say, but as I try to find my way back to the original trail, let me just reiterate that Pentecost is a festival day that has its roots in an annual feast held by our ancestors in the faith, the Jews. The roots of the Jewish festival of Pentecost (the feast of weeks, or Shavu’ot) come from Leviticus 23:16 (NRSV), where it says, “You shall count until the day after the seventh Sabbath, fifty days, then you shall present an offering of new grain to the Lord.” It is a time of great anticipation in which observant Jews count the days from the second day of Passover to the day before Shavu’ot (harvest). The purpose of the counting is to remind observers of the connection between Passover and Shavu’ot: Passover, which freed the Israelites from physical bondage in Egypt, and Shavu’ot, which redeemed them spiritually from bondage to idolatry and immorality. And so it was for this feast day that people from all of these different places, all of these different cultural and language and ethnic groups had come into Jerusalem to make an offering of new grain in remembrance of the freedom and redemption they had been given through the covenant.

It was Paul who picked up on this festival and “co-opted” it for Christians to become a day for followers of Jesus Christ to celebrate and commemorate the coming of the Holy Spirit to form the church: “Now if the ministry of death came chiseled in stone tablets, came in glory. . . how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory?” (2 Corinthians 3:7-8, NRSV).

And so Pentecost came to commemorate the day when the Spirit of Christ came to rest on the disciples and all the other people who had gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, as the story is told in our reading for today. It is the day that the Spirit came to live in the body of Christ on earth, the church.

The Day of Pentecost was a day of transformation for many people as they heard the good news of Jesus Christ proclaimed for the first time and in ways they could really understand, ways that made sense for them, for their lives and their circumstances. It was a life-changing message for people, many of whom became converts and were baptized.

As you look around your congregation on Pentecost and consider that this is the day of all days in the church for proclaiming the good news to people in your community who have not yet heard it, consider why there are fewer visitors on this day than there were on Easter or on Christmas. I realize I am making an assumption here, but I want to challenge us all to really think about how we can reclaim the importance of this day, not just for our members, but for our larger witness in the communities we serve.

What can you do to make Pentecost the day that you as a congregation witness about Jesus Christ to your neighbors who do not yet know his saving love? How can you spread the good news on this day? How can you faithfully participate in the ministries of the church by your witness to others? What can you do to bring visitors in? Or, better yet, how can you take the good news out to the places where people are already gathering? How can you grow your witness of the ministry of all believers so that all of the people who live around you, especially those who are not believers, will be able to hear about the love of Christ in a way that they really understand, a way that speaks their language and makes sense for their lives and their circumstances?

**[John 14:8-17 (25-27)](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=141" \l "gospel_reading)**

Before the festival of the Passover, John tells us that Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. So he invited the disciples to share a final meal with him, a simple meal of bread and wine.

According to John, during the meal Jesus got up from the table, went and got a basin and a towel, and began to wash the feet of his followers. The disciples, especially Peter, were upset by this gesture. They felt that it was wrong for their teacher to be washing their feet. They thought it ought to be the other way around.

But Jesus insisted that he was trying to teach them something important by his actions: not only should they allow him to wash their feet, but that they should then go and wash one another’s feet, and, indeed, other people’s feet. Through his actions, he was trying to communicate to them that servants are not greater than their masters, nor are messengers greater than the ones who send them. He then went on to say that he was going away soon, but the most important thing he wanted them to remember was that they should love one another just as he had loved them, and that it was by their love that other people would know that they were his disciples.

Peter asked where he was going, and he answered with those very familiar lines that we know because they are commonly read at funerals and memorial services. It is that section of Scripture that starts out, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? I am the way, and the truth, and the life” and “if you have known me, you have known the Father also” (John 14: 1-3, 6-7 NRSV).

So in response to this, Philip made the demand we read in today’s lesson: “Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied” (John 14:8 NRSV).

And Jesus says, “Philip, don’t you understand? Have you been with me all this time and you still don’t get it? If you have seen me, you have seen God. Don’t you believe me? Don’t you believe that God’s Spirit is in me and I am in God’s Spirit? And that the words I say are not my own, but the words of God’s spirit that dwells in me? And if you don’t believe what I’m saying, can’t you at least believe what you have seen with your own eyes. Can’t you believe in the works you have witnessed?” (John 14: 8-10, paraphrased by author).

Then he gets to the part that I think is really radical. He says, “Philip, the ones who believe in me—those who have heard my words and have seen my works —when I’m gone from this place, they will do even greater works than these, because even though I am going to be with the Father, the same spirit that was in me will be in those who have believed in me” (John 14: 9-12, paraphrased by author).

Do we believe this? Do we believe that the followers of Jesus have been able to do even greater works than what Jesus himself did?

On the day of Pentecost, as the book of Acts records it, all the folks who had been following Jesus around and learning from him had gathered in one place as Jesus had instructed them to do. They had gathered in Jerusalem to await whatever final work it was that Jesus had in store for them.

Acts reports that on the appointed day, suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue of fire rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit of God, just has Jesus had been. And they began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability, so that Jews from every nation under heaven who had come to live in Jerusalem, with all their many different languages and tongues that were spoken in this metropolitan city, suddenly were able to hear the Word of Jesus Christ spoken to them in their own language. Everyone was amazed and confused by how this could be. Some people even thought maybe everyone was drunk.

But then Peter, empowered by the Spirit, the very same spirit that had dwelled in Jesus, stood up and began preaching to the whole crowd about Jesus. He started telling anyone who would listen to him what Jesus had said. And he and the other disciples started laying hands on folks as Jesus had done, and offering healing in the name of Christ.

Just as Jesus had done, they preached good news to the poor. They proclaimed release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind. They liberated the oppressed. They healed the sick and fed the hungry. They visited those who were in prison. They took care of the widows and the orphans and the lost and the lame. They invited the lepers and the prostitutes and the tax collectors and the other cast-off members of society to be a part of their community.

The amazing thing about this is that because there were so many of them they were able to go to many different communities and speak the words of Jesus in whatever language people spoke. Some of the disciples traveled around to faraway places to bring the good news to increasing numbers of people all over the Roman Empire.

Very truly I tell you, the ones who believe in Jesus will also do the works that he does, and in fact, will do greater works than these, because he has gone to the Father! (John 14: 12)

Do we see it? Do we believe it? Do we believe that in Jesus Christ we have seen the Father?

Do we believe that as the body of Christ, we can do greater works because our Lord has gone to the Father? Do we believe that the Spirit of God resides in us, in our churches and in our communities, just as powerfully as it did in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost?

**[Romans 8:14-17](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=141" \l "epistle_reading)**

If you preach on either of these passages, consider using the reading from Romans as a congregational response to the proclamation of the Word after the sermon.

Leader: All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

**People: The Spirit of God leads us! We are God’s children!**

Leader: For we did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear—

**People: We have received a spirit of adoption! Abba! Father! We are your children!**

Leader: God’s very spirit is in us.

**All: We are children of God. We are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.**