Sunday, May 18, 1986
PENTECOST IS FOREVER
Acts 2:1-8,12-15; John 14:25-27

One of the most amazing promises which Jesus made to His disciples, before His crucifixion and resurrection, was that after He was no longer with them, as He had been, they would experience the power of God's Spirit in their lives in a new way. Jesus called this power the "Holy Spirit."

Then on Pentecost, it happened. The story was read earlier from the book of Acts in the New Testament. What is Pentecost? And what does it have to do with you and me in today's world?

I. What is Pentecost?

The word "Pentecost" means, in its simplest sense, "50th day," and for Christians, it refers to the 50th day after Easter, when according to Christian tradition, the disciples and other followers of Jesus received a new impetus, a powerful push to go into the world and tell others about the good news of the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
So far as we can tell from Luke's account in the book of Acts, the original disciples, now reduced to eleven after the suicide of Judas, did very little to carry on the work of Jesus after the resurrection, except to choose another person to take the place of Judas. It was as if they were waiting for some kind of signal to begin.

Then came the day of Pentecost, a Jewish holiday, and since all the early disciples and followers of Jesus were Jews, a whole group of believers had gathered together in one place to celebrate that holiday. But in that gathering, something unusual and unexpected happened. The way Luke described it in the book of Acts, there was a strange sound and it seemed as if tongues of fire came to rest on all those who were gathered and everyone spoke in different languages and dialects which could be understood by the many foreigners who were there.

Now here, as in the case of other biblical accounts, we could get all bogged down in the minute details of the story and miss the total impact of the experience. We could wonder about the "tongues of fire" and the sound which came like the mighty rush of a wind and the speaking in various languages. This is not to say that the details such as these do not have significance. But it is the overall impact of the event that we're most interested in.

And in the case of the first Pentecost, we know that as a result of it, the disciples now became bold and daring witnesses for Jesus Christ. Until the Pentecost experience, the disciples that Jesus had trained hadn't done very much. But the day of Pentecost changed all that. It was the turning point. On that day, the church literally took fire and began to spread.

Secondly, among themselves, in their own company, the followers of Jesus were changed in a unique way. They became aware of a presence and power in them and among them which made it possible for them to be drawn together into a new kind of harmony.
In temperament, nationality, language, culture, and social class, each person present on that Pentecost occasion was different from the others. But now in spite of their differences, they experienced a new kind of relationship with each other. We can say that the group of Christians had a new spirit and that is what today we still call the "Holy Spirit." They became aware of God's power in and among them in a fresh way.

This does not mean they became a homogeneous classless or undifferentiated collection of people. They were, in fact, even more aware of their differences. What Pentecost did was to create out of this diverse gathering a new kind of harmony without destroying individual differences. People were freed to be themselves in all of their individuality and potentiality, and yet were drawn into a harmonious fellowship with others that transcended their differences. Together they now proclaimed the works of God in word and in deed.

Thirdly, the church became more than an in-group. It reached out. Its character changed. The disciples became apostles. They now began to act on the knowledge that God was actively at work and that all people everywhere were part of one family under God. The disciples became preachers.
As part of the story of that first Pentecost, the book of Acts gives us an example of the kind of preaching that began to take form in the early church. It gives us a condensation of the first major sermon that the Apostle Peter preached. Here's my paraphrase of that sermon as Luke reports it in the book of Acts.

Peter's Sermon:

People of Judea, and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you. We are not drunk, as you are accusing us. It's only nine o'clock in the morning. However, we are filled with God's Spirit, and I am going to tell you how God's Old Testament promises have been fulfilled. By now you've all heard of Jesus of Nazareth, a man who walked among us with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through Him. This Jesus was crucified and killed by the hands of lawless people, but God raised Him up having loosed the pangs of death because it was not possible for Jesus to be held by death. This Jesus God raised up and of that we are all witnesses. This Jesus was God in human form, but because He has lived among us and has risen from the dead, God's Spirit is now among us and working within us in a new way. God's power is present in the world in a way that has not been known or experienced before the coming of Jesus.

The book of Acts reported that when the people who had gathered together heard this sermon, they asked, "What shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the promise of the Holy Spirit. All of you are welcome as followers of Jesus Christ."

That's a summary, a very brief one, of what the Bible reports happened on that first Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus. Peter's sermon got a strong positive response. The book of Acts says that there were added that day to the church about 3,000 persons. That's powerful preaching.

II. What does Pentecost have to do with you and me in today's world?

Pentecost is not a once-for-all experience, it is forever. It happens over and over again. Since that first Pentecost, the church has used preaching in word and deed to continue to reach out to anyone who is willing to listen. Here's how that Pentecost sermon might sound today.

Men and women in 1986, we Christians are not drunk or crazy as some of you accuse us of being. However, we do see the world and all of creation in a new way because of being followers of Jesus Christ. To an outsider with a so-called common-sense, practical, everyday-way of looking at the world, what Jesus Christ preached and taught seems like foolishness.

“Blessed are the meek; blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are the merciful; blessed are the peacemakers; blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.”

Jesus also said, “Those who seek to save their lives will lose them, but those who give themselves away will find life.” Sure that does sound like foolishness in a world that is dominated by greed and by those who seek power over others. And the fact of Jesus letting Himself be killed without fighting back, and then God raising Him from the dead seems like even more foolishness to people who believe that “might makes right,” or the way to be a savior is to have the biggest army.

But God’s ways are not our ways, says the Bible. Furthermore, because of Jesus Christ, God’s power and peace are now available to all people everywhere. All one has to do is to accept God in one’s life and commit yourself to following God’s ways.

This is good news because all people on Earth throughout the ages have been on a search for a relationship with God that is eternal. We long to be at one with God and to be at one with other people. In fact, we many times first experience God by coming into a deeper relationship with others.

The psalmist wrote long ago, “As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” All people everywhere want God to become real to them. We want to know that we are in contact with the source of all life.

The fact is that many people do not put this longing or this desire into religious language. But the longing is there all the same. It is seen most clearly in the way in which all people seek to make some sense out of life. All people seek meaning in their living, something to hang onto, something to give focus and direction to their living. Many do this in ways that ultimately will not satisfy. Some, for example, try to own more and more things, believing that this will satisfy this deep longing. Others try to hold onto their youth, doing everything possible to deny the fact that one day they will die. One man, now in his early forties, said, “I thought if I didn’t settle down, I could stay young forever. I was wrong. You get old whether you’re wearing a necktie or not.”

Others still seek power for power’s sake, and there are yet others who seek happiness for happiness’ sake. The search for the sacred in life is everywhere, even though many times misguided. It is seen in the scientist who pursues a truth always beyond him or her. The artist lives for beauty. Others seek God in nature, but what do they really want? What do you want in life and after this life? Even human love in and of itself cannot ultimately satisfy us. The point is, in all of our searching, we are seeking God. We want to know God. We want to find what is at the center of all life and creation.

Philip, one of Jesus’ disciples, said to Jesus one day, “Show us God and we shall be satisfied.” Our souls thirst for God, for the living God.

Sisters and brothers in 1986, this longing has been satisfied. What all people have sought from the beginning of time; what God has promised so long ago has taken place. God is with us. God is within us. God is among us. God’s Spirit is everywhere available. God has been most uniquely revealed in a human being, in Jesus of Nazareth.

Here was God supremely focused in a human being. Jesus didn’t come to call the righteous, but to call the sinners to repentance. “Follow me,” said Jesus, and those who followed found in

their relationship with Jesus a new way of looking at life and death and a new way of seeing all persons and a new way of understanding God. And in a wonderful and mysterious way, those who have followed Jesus in every age have found in their lives a new power, a new dimension, a new spirit. They also discovered that even in their suffering God was with them.

When Jesus was among us, some people, especially those who considered themselves the most righteous, could not stand Him. They thought they knew better how to run God's creation. Jesus Christ, by what He lived and taught, brought a kind of judgment upon all of us and our pretensions and our self-righteousness. He talked about a loving, inclusive, forgiving God. He ate with sinners. He accepted those whom others rejected. He showed us that there is much more to a true religion than just obeying rules. He talked about a new morality of love. He upset many of the traditional ways of thinking and acting and His spirit still does.

So it wasn't long before the authorities decided that Jesus had to be gotten rid of. He was crucified. But He did not stay dead. This Jesus God raised up and through His resurrection, a new power has been released in the creation. God has established a new order in society.

You can be a part of this new age of God. When you do become a part of it, you begin to be changed from a self-centered, self-seeking, greedy, stingy individual into a new kind of person with a new sense of freedom. It's like being born anew. You begin to be changed from one who is anxious and afraid into the kind of person who has courage and hope. And you become committed to others and want to reach out to them in love. God's Spirit, or that which we like to call the Holy Spirit, begins to take charge of your life.

The good news further is that the Christian faith and the Christian life are not to be seen as grim battles or as a lonely joyless pilgrimage, but rather as a life lived with the very vitality of God who is present among us.

Now it is possible that some of you here have up to now been attempting to live your life without God. It is possible that you feel in your bones that there is a life of better quality and with more joy and freedom. You may want to feel a part of a larger purpose; you want to know that you are connected with Almighty God!

This new kind of life can begin for you. It means dropping your ridiculous habit of trying to justify ourselves and accepting the reconciliation which Christ has made. It means accepting the fact that we are inseparably connected with the eternal life of God so that there is nothing that life can do and nothing that death can do to interfere with that relationship. God's Spirit is waiting to be a leading part of your life. Pentecost is forever! Amen.