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From the Pulpit

Sermon: "The Other 12"
The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ May 23, 2010

Acts 19:1-7
Ezekiel 37:1-10

All around the world today Christian sisters and brothers in all kinds of ecclesiastical traditions from Baptist to Episcopalians, from Catholics to Presbyterians -- all of us are celebrating Pentecost: the birthday of the church. The word Pentecost simply comes from the Greek word for 50 as this Christian festival always falls 50 days after Easter. Pentecost is called the birthday of the church because it is on that day in particular just after Jesus' ascension that the Spirit comes upon the disciples in power and transforms them from fearful followers into bold disciples.

So all around the world today Christians are gathering to observe Pentecost with songs of praise and services of celebration, with brightly colored vestments and banners of white doves and red flames, with litanies of remembrance and dances of joy -- with words of hope and prayers for renewal.

And yet... for all that may be happening in these churches in the art, in the music, in the liturgy and the preaching; for all that is reflected in the songs and the banners and the bulletins and the words -- the *truth* is, in far too many churches -- in far too many pews *and pulpits* -- people are not experiencing in their hearts the reality of what they're saying and celebrating about Pentecost. Pentecost 2010 and for a lot of us there is a disconnect between what the Bible *tells* us about this day and our own personal experience of spirituality.

I've been reflecting on the word *acedia* lately. *Acedia* is one of those words we don't hear very often. It comes out of the contemplative tradition and reaches back to the desert fathers and the monks of the 4th century. The word is more or less a transliteration of a Greek word which means spiritual listlessness, stagnation, and lassitude. *Acedia* is a sluggishness of the spirit; it's a lethargy of the soul; a weariness of faith -- to have *acedia* is to experience spiritual doldrums.

We can experience *acedia* for a number of reasons. Sometimes it's just a season of our spiritual lives -- the mystics called it the "dark night of the soul." Sometimes *acedia* happens as a result of neglect, of not much time or energy or intentionality in our lives of faith. Sometimes *acedia* comes from a feeling of estrangement between ourselves and God -- even though we weekly hear and affirm that God in Christ has brought us near and reconciled us; even so, we

don't always feel close to God. Sometimes we experience acedia because our lives get so busy and we run so fast and we juggle so many things that there just is no space or place for God in our lives.

I guess I've been thinking about the word acedia because I think I've been experiencing a bit of it in the last few months. Being down one pastor here at a very busy church my life has become more full and church more demanding and I find myself out more nights of the week and up at work early and sometimes that means I neglect some of those practices that help keep my spirit fresh.

I'm not complaining here about my job at all (these are choices I make); I just want to recognize that acedia happens and that none of us are immune! I've been greatly helped by our Step Beyond program and the commitment we made to our spiritual lives and the accountability and support I feel from my Step Beyond small group. And I'm grateful several weeks ago to have had a chance to just go out into the Mojave Desert and for 3 days not eat any food or see any people or even speak any words to myself: a completely silent, alone time of reflection and renewal. *Nevertheless*, spirituality suffers when we neglect those streams of renewal and stop drinking from the well of God's love.

Pentecost is God's antidote to acedia. Pentecost is God's promise to be with us -- to be *within* us -- and to transform us and make us spiritually alive. If you find on this day that your soul feels a little dry, that your experience of God is a little stale -- that your spiritual life is in the doldrums -- if you feel like the descriptions of Pentecost and the celebrations of the church don't resonate with your experience of faith... then take hope; and take heart; and take hold of the Spirit who comes to touch our souls and transform our lives.

Now, all that is prelude to our passage today. This is an interesting little text of Scripture. In 32 years I have never preached on this passage; and in all the services that I've sat through I've never heard a sermon on these verses. And yet it's an important text; and not just because it's in the Bible, but because it says some very important things about our lives of faith.

We could look at this text from the historical perspective of the little enclaves of disciples of John the Baptist that continued to exist in the first century that somehow and for some reason never became disciples of Jesus. We could talk about this text in terms of the Pentecostal doctrine of the 2nd blessing and their emphasis on the fullness of the Spirit. Some of you may have come from that tradition and I'd be glad to talk to you another time about this text in that respect because it's important as we develop a theology of the Holy Spirit -- a *pneumatology*, as scholars call it.

But I want to talk about this passage in terms of the critical move from an external religiosity to an internal spirituality. Let's look at the text. The apostle Paul is traveling and comes to Ephesus where he meets a group of 12 disciples -- not *our* 12 disciples mind you, but the *other* 12; the group that didn't quite get it and hadn't quite yet come to a real and vital connection with God. The other 12 are nameless, we don't know who they are -- they could be any of us who seem to miss that vital connection with God and for whom our religion feels like a duty at best and a burden at worst.

The apostle runs into these *other* 12 disciples. They are disciples of John the Baptist but *not* of Jesus. What does that mean? It means that they heard John's preaching in which he called Israel to confession and to a new rigor in their lives of faith. When John baptized people it was a

baptism of repentance in which the people acknowledged their sins and sought to have them washed away in the Jordan River.

John himself lived a life of religious asceticism, a highly disciplined -- even harsh -- lifestyle where, when he wasn't fasting, his diet was locusts and honey (kind of a precursor to the Jenny Craig weight loss program). John didn't cut his hair or his beard -- he was a Nazarite. He wore an itchy camel hair garment (and this is different than the soft camel *mohair* jacket you might have in your closet). His preaching was thunderous, his willingness to challenge the people and offend the authorities was famous -- John called people to look at their lives and recognize where they had gone wrong, confess their sins and then begin to live in keeping with God's commandments. So these other 12 disciples that Paul met -- they were disciples of John the Baptist.

Now, what I find interesting here is to wonder why it was that Paul asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" What was it about their lives, what was it about their expression of faith, about their spirituality, about their experience of God -- what was it about their lives that prompted Paul to even ask if they had received the Holy Spirit?

See, I think that *at best* they had a religion of rigor: a religion that was about the externals of trying to *do* what is right and to recognize where they were wrong -- a religion of confession and asceticism, of discipline and obedience... *but* maybe not of joy; maybe not of love; maybe not of freedom in life and power in ministry. Maybe that's what they were missing that made Paul wonder, have you received the Holy Spirit. Whatever it was he knew something wasn't right about their Christian experience. Maybe you've had that same sense about yourself from time to time.

Friends, Pentecost is the antidote to acedia because on Pentecost the Spirit of the living God is poured out upon us to renew our lives, to refresh our spirits and to equip us to be about God's work in the world. Maybe for some of us spirituality has just been about going through the motions, about the externals, about recognizing where we're wrong and feeling bad about that and trying harder and harder to do what is right. Maybe we haven't really had that transforming, Spirit filling, joy producing, Jesus centered experience of God in our lives. Because religion doesn't do it. And coming to church, in of itself, doesn't do it. And knowing we're wrong and trying to do better -- as well-intentioned as those things are... they don't do it.

The Holy Spirit of God is not elusive or exclusive; the Spirit of God is not distant or just for a few -- the Spirit of God is poured out upon anyone and everyone who commits themselves to Jesus Christ and opens their heart to his life and love. And when we make that commitment we experience our own personal Pentecost and the Holy Spirit comes upon us a new and significant ways.

Last week I was driving down one of our busy, divided roads and saw a man pushing his car towards a gas station. Because of the traffic and the divided road I didn't stop to help him, and he was basically there anyway. But it stuck with me as an interesting image. His car *looked* fine. It had 4 wheels, it had a steering wheel and doors, it had a nice paint job -- I don't know, maybe it had a great sound system inside. His car was *fine* for all appearances from the outside except that it didn't have the fuel to make it go; and so he was out pushing it all by himself -- a slow and arduous way to move your car down the road. Do you ever feel like that's how your religion goes: instead of being carried along in power you're pushing your car out on the side of the road?

Friends, we're part of a great church here. But it would be so unfortunate if we only went halfway in our religion, if we only had an *external* experience and expression of religion without any internal reality of God in our lives. It would be so unfortunate if we were only aware of the ways in which our lives fall short and if we are always trying harder and harder in our own strength and energy to do better -- endlessly running on a hamster wheel of guilt and gumption.

Pentecost is the antidote for acedia. For the listless of spirit, for the weary of heart, for the faint of faith and the lethargic of soul this is a day when you can make that critical move from an external to an internal experience of faith. In this time of quiet reflection let me invite you to lean into God's love, commit yourself -- or renew your commitment -- to Jesus Christ; and open yourself to the Spirit who comes to enliven our hearts and equip us for God's to work in the world.