

The Good Friday-Pentecost Connection

What a treat it is for all of us to be together today under one roof in one worship service! Those of you who are accustomed to the formality and classical music of our traditional service may be feeling like fish out of water in this contemporary setting today, but in a few months we will all have an opportunity to be together in a traditional setting for a combined worship service. Please remember that the purpose of this joint worship service is for you to renew old friendships with people you may not have seen lately and to meet some new Memorial members and visitors. I am very lucky! I get to experience both worship services each week, and I get to enjoy the fellowship and good music of both services. Unfortunately, I usually have to listen to the same sorry preacher in both services.

Today is Pentecost Sunday. We have celebrated the harsh days of Lent, the wondrous days of Easter, the glory of the ascension into heaven, and today we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Disciples and the beginning of the early church.

You parents of little children have probably experienced this with your children, as I did with mine. You are preparing to leave on an overnight trip without them, and there is weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth, and that's just from your spouse! But your children also cry and cry. Then you come up with an idea! You say to the children, "If I go away, I will bring you a present - a surprise - when I get back!" The crying ceases, and the kids push you out the door! "Go on and leave! Just don't forget that present."

The Disciples were like little children on the eve of Good Friday when Jesus said that the time had come for Him to leave them, that is, to die and return to God. He tried to cheer them up by promising to send them a present, saying, "It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." It was Jesus' departure - His death - that would open the way for the Spirit to come.

So there it is, the Good Friday-Pentecost Connection! Pentecost was made possible by Good Friday. The Spirit was able to come upon the Disciples on Pentecost Day because that which had been blocking His coming - our sin and guilt - had been removed by Jesus' atoning death. Pentecost Day and the birth of the church stand as testimonies to Christ's victory over sin and as testimonies of His resurrection and coronation. Today, whenever a person acknowledges Christ as Savior, at that moment the blockade of sin is removed from his or her life and the Holy Spirit comes into us as a witness to us that we are God's children.

Wasn't that what John Wesley's Aldersgate experience was all about?

Wesley, the scholar, the missionary to Savannah, the Anglican priest, knew all about Jesus and the cross, but he found it hard to believe that he was worthy of having his sins included in Christ's forgiveness. Have you ever felt like Wesley did or known someone who did? God loves and forgives everybody except me. His death was for everybody else's sin but not mine. Then at the prayer meeting at Aldersgate Street in London, Wesley heard a 200-year-old sermon being read, and as the word was being proclaimed, Wesley realized that he did trust in Christ and that his sins were included in the Good Friday atonement. Pentecost happened to Wesley! He felt his heart strangely warmed by the coming of the Holy Spirit to him. Pentecost Day is repeated every time someone awakens to the Good Friday truth that Jesus is our Savior. By faith, the blockage of sin is removed, our guilt is released, and our hearts are strangely warmed by the Holy Spirit.

This is one of the Good Friday-Pentecost Day connections. The second connection involves the creation of the Church by the Spirit's activity that Day. Those who were filled with the Holy Spirit came together to proclaim the news about Good Friday and Easter. The story has a bit of humor in it, especially if you have a warped sense of humor like I have! The Disciples, hidden away in an upper room, became so energized and filled with joy by the Spirit that their prayer meeting spilled out into the streets of Jerusalem at nine o'clock in the morning. Some foreigners were mystified at hearing the Gospel story in their native languages as the Spirit enabled the Disciples to speak. But others thought that the Disciples were just drunk. It is at this point that Peter uttered the first blooper of the early church: "We aren't drunk - it is way too early for that!" One almost expected him to add, "But if you will come back a little later..." I know that sometimes when some of us are eating at a restaurant together - a Sunday School Class or a group of my preacher friends - our laughter creates such a disturbance that some folks may wonder what we are drinking, too! But what happened that Pentecost Day was most amazing. Here was this group of men and women who had lived in fear and hiding for fifty days because their leader had been declared an enemy of Rome and then executed, and they figured that they would be next. For fifty days the resurrected Christ had been in their midst, but they had not spread the word because they were still afraid. Then something happened that removed their fears and sent them into the very streets they had been avoiding and into the crowd they had been hiding from. Boldly they told the Good News about Jesus and they succeeded. Thousands were baptized that day and the Church was born.

Someone has said that the most obvious and yet most overlooked witness to the resurrection of Jesus is the very existence of the Church. It should not have been born. It should not have survived. Most often in history when a leader is killed, followers scatter and the movement fails. The great first century teacher

Gamaliel recognized that something extraordinary was keeping the Church together, and he advised the religious leaders to be careful of how they treated the Disciples, saying that they might find themselves opposing the work of God! Why hadn't the Disciples scattered? That would have been the safest course of action. Just blend back into society and become invisible. Instead, here they are in the streets preaching about a Good Friday death, an Easter resurrection, and a Pentecost Day gift. It was their confidence that Jesus was alive and with them again by means of the Holy Spirit that held them together and sent them into all the world.

And what a motley crew they were. People from rival cities, some saints and some reformed thieves and sinners, some rich, most poor, people that should never have gotten along, all unified and held together by some commonly held beliefs and experiences. They were in one Honda... or one accord, anyway. They believed that the cause of Christ was worth any sacrifice, and so they sold possessions and pooled their resources to finance the spread of the Gospel. They believed that Jesus, Whose Spirit they shared on Pentecost, was calling them all back to Good Friday to carry a cross of sacrifice for each other and the world, to give their time and talent and money, to give up their creature comforts, to give up their lives, if necessary, and it was often necessary. But it must have been very exciting to be part of that first church. When I compare their commitment to Christ with ours today, I am troubled. The Jerusalem Church had no idea what was next or where they were going or how they would get there, but it looks like their theme song was "I'm Going Out in a Blaze of Glory" while ours is "I'll Rust Away, O Glory." We take few risks for our faith, choosing rather just to survive, while they risked everything. They went to the far ends of the earth to make new friends for Jesus; we find an excuse not to cross the street to invite a new neighbor to come with us to church. And yet the fact that the church is still here in the world, 2000 plus years after the birth of Christ, is a continuing witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Something has kept us going, growing, adapting and changing, and that something is our common experience of the resurrected Christ in our midst.

Back in grad school, one of my professors was encouraging us to study church history. He said that we would find comfort as we examined various heresies, theologians, the famous and the infamous. If those people who came before us couldn't mess up the Church, then there is a good chance that we won't either, he told us. As we say in one of our Baptismal services, "The Church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time, for the conduct of worship and the due administration of God's Word and Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of believers, and the conversion of the world. All, of every age and station, stand in need of the means of grace which it

alone supplies.”

Pentecost Day completes the story. The atonement begun on Good Friday and completed on Easter received its strongest endorsement and testimony on Pentecost Day when the Holy Spirit came as evidence that our sins had been washed away. Empowered by the Spirit, the Disciples began their journey into all the world as the Church was formed. As the Spirit’s coming testifies that our sins are forgiven, the Church’s birth testifies that Jesus lives and reigns forever, one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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May 31, 2009