

Pentecost Places

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Acts 2:1-13

One of the things you learn early on as a preacher is that on a Sunday morning as folks make their way into the parking lot and starting coming in the door what they are bringing with them are a whole host of questions. The sanctuary on a Sunday morning is a room full of questions. The mysterious and wondrous human soul and contains within it a myriad of questions about the world and about life – and people bring those questions with them to church – both consciously and unconsciously. Some of them sometimes actually have something to do with church itself – even fewer have any correlation at all to what the preacher is going to talk about. It may be a Sunday morning and you are at church – but the question you have is about a presentation you are going to make at work on Wednesday. It may be that the preacher is going to talk about love, but your question is about your 1040 tax return. It is somewhat overwhelming and humbling when I look out upon a congregation and imagine all the questions that have been brought to this moment by you and by me.

There is one question I believe that people bring to this place more than most others and it is a question of how they feel about themselves as persons. How am I doing as a person? Am I all of what I would want to be? Am I all of what God might want me to be? Is there a better person inside of me somewhere? And if so, how do I become this better person? Abraham Lincoln called it – “the better angels of our nature”. How do I bring forth the better angel of my nature? Preachers will tell you that this is a question they often get – especially in our one-to-one conversations – “Preacher, how do I become a better person.”

Philips Brooks, the author of “O Little Town of Bethlehem” said it this way: “Bad will be day for every man when he becomes absolutely contented with the life that he is living, with the thoughts that he is thinking, with the deeds that he is doing, when there is not forever beating at the doors of his soul some great

desire to do something larger, which he knows that he was meant and made to do because he is still, in spite of all, the child of God.”

That’s a way of asking the question of the day, “Is there a better person inside of you that you want to become?” And I bet most of us -- maybe all of us -- yearn to be that better person.

Now the movement from yearning to be a better person to actually trying to become a better person is one of the great marks of human and spiritual maturity. It is one of the signs that a person has moved from childhood to adulthood when that person takes up the concern of becoming a better person. Not a smarter person, not a richer person, not a more powerful person, not even a better person over against anyone else, but simply the better person that is inside of here. It is no surprise that when the apostle Paul talks about the gift of love in his wonderful 13th chapter of I Corinthians he acknowledges that to talk of love one must take on an adult maturity: “When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, but when I became an adult I put an end to childish ways.” To be better, or for Paul to become more loving, is to mature. It is to become an adult.

But the question is how? How do I become this better person?

Pentecost might be a good day for us to wonder about that question because Pentecost certainly is a day within our story when a bunch of people became together different people. Something happened on Pentecost where a collection of timid, reluctant, confused people all of a sudden changed into passionate, forthright, clearly articulate people who had good news to tell and certainly were not afraid to lay it on the line. Those who doubted, those who hid, those who denied – were now people who had received a power from beyond themselves and became, as a result, better people. Not elevated people. Not “I’ve got one over on you” kind of people. But inside their own stories they became better in respect to becoming more of what God would hope them to be.

I think most of us have that wonderment, don’t we? How can I become more of what God would hope me to be?

Now the far to easy answer to give at Pentecost – is

“The good things we do, the good things we are come as a result of our gratitude.”

simply to say that what makes us a better person is simply and merely receiving the Holy Spirit. It would be true to say that – I believe our hope of becoming better is doomed if we do not rely upon the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. But that is only half the answer that I believe Pentecost gives us to this question of becoming a better person. Because what Pentecost is begging to remind us in our celebration is what was it that brought those apostles together in that one place where they received the Holy Spirit. “On the day of Pentecost,” Luke tells us, “they were together in one place.” And what was it that they were doing together? What they were doing together was they were celebrating one of the great Feasts of God’s people – the Feast of Weeks. The Greeks called it Pentecost, but the Jews called it the Feast of Weeks. And the Feast of Weeks was the Jewish answer to Thanksgiving Day. The Feast of Weeks took place seven weeks after Passover and it was the time when the people of God celebrated and gave thanks for the harvest. In particular, the harvest of grain – the harvest of wheat. It was a time to rejoice in the providence of God who allowed them the harvest. They were gathered giving thanks for the simple gift of the food on their plates and that was the time when the Holy Spirit came.

Now can I submit to you this morning that this is not just one of those coincidences? Can I suggest to you today that there is a deep truth about your life and mine to be learned here about the experience of Pentecost? And that is the experience of the Holy Spirit is likely to be found in the expression of our thanksgiving. We become better by virtue of the Holy Spirit and we become aware of the power of the Holy Spirit in the expression of our gratitude.

You know the truth is one of the great marks of maturity – spiritual or otherwise – is our increasing ability to give thanks. Thankfulness is the mark of a mature person. Every kid growing up gets commanded by their parents

to say thank you when the child is given something. “What do you say?” we ask our children. And we ask it because they are children and they haven’t given much thought to being thankful. “What do you say?” we ask. “Thank you ...” they say with almost an obligatory tone. But maturity, spiritual maturity to be sure, comes when gratitude begins to take hold of our hearts and our souls. A mature person is a thankful person. The quest to be better, dare I say, originates in our ability to be thankful. One, I believe, begets the other. Life takes on a whole new dimension when we pause and look at what we have and who we are and from whence we’ve come – and we say – Wow! I did so little to deserve this. The apostles paused in the Festival of Weeks and gave thanks for grain they did not grow, and maybe fish they did not put into the sea. And in their thanksgiving the Spirit came. And when the Spirit came they became different people. Thankfulness inspires improvement. Gratitude ignites self-renovation. The good things we do and the good things we are come as the result of being thankful.

Yesterday I was up at my Alma Mater in Pennsylvania at commencement. We honored a man who had given much to the college, an abundance of his time, abundance of his wisdom and abundance of his money. And after the awards were presented and the applause subsided, he said to the arena of people, “You have it backwards. It is I who must give thanks to you for the honor of service, for the honor of serving you and being part of something bigger than myself.” The good things we do, the good things we are come as a result of our gratitude.

It makes me think of a story I read not too long ago about a group of World War II veterans have been getting together for several decades at a restaurant in Suffolk, Virginia called Bunny’s. What the men hold in common is not only that they are veterans of the same

war, but they were POW's -- Prisoners of War -- in the same theater of that war, the South Pacific. Many of them were survivors of the Bataan Death March. And every month they gather at Bunny's Restaurant to have a little fellowship, tell a few stories, and maintain the bond of their shared experience.

It was several years ago that one morning when these former POW's got up from their breakfast and went to pay their bill that the restaurant owner announced to them that the bill had been paid. The entire bill had been paid. "Who paid?" the veterans asked. The owner said he wasn't sure. The following month when the veterans got up to pay they learned that again their bill had been taken care of and that the benefactor wished to remain anonymous. Next month, same thing. Month after that, same thing. This went on for years. A group of veterans and fellow prisoners of war having fellowship and somebody unknown picking up the tab.

Finally a waitress let it slip and the man's identity was revealed. It turned out to be a local businessman, William Blair, who had happened into Bunny's on that morning years before. And he noticed as he got out of his car and was walking through the parking lot all these license plates with POW insignias on them. When he went inside he inquired of the owner about these men and the owner told him they were fellow prisoners of war and they got together each month for some camaraderie. "Well then," Mr. Blair said, "Breakfast is on me" and swore the owner to secrecy. "Furthermore," he said, "as long as those guys get together breakfast is always going to be on me."

Mr. Blair said that when those men were sitting in those prisoner of war camps he was just a little boy back here in the states playing in the streets, having fun with his friends, and not giving much thought to what sacrifice was being paid for the security he enjoyed. But now he knows. He knows those men allowed him to have a childhood and he's thankful. And his thankfulness he knew had to go beyond words and sentiment. He had to do something, give something. So as small a gesture as it was breakfast was going to be on him.

Thankfulness, you see, begets doing the right thing. We do good things out of our gratitude. The starting point for becoming a better person is the level of our gratefulness.

And so there the disciples are gathered in their gratitude and raising the sheaf of elevation when the Holy Spirit comes and fills them and empowers them and begins to make them into something more than what they were. We can't forget what the disciples were doing when the Holy Spirit came to them. They weren't just sitting around. They were thanking God. And their thanksgiving became the breeding ground for the Holy Spirit to start changing them and making them into the people God wanted them to be.

So the Pentecost question might be -- what is my discipline of intentional gratitude? What is the rhythm of my life that allows for me to pause and see all the reasons to give thanks and find their the quickening of the Holy Spirit to live my life in response?

It makes me think of David Horace. You may not know the story of David Horace. David Horace is a good man. He lives in Georgia and he is the chief of police at Georgia Highlands College. He is loved and respected in his community. David tries to do the right thing. And David has spent a good portion of his life trying to keep people safe and also raise money for a scholarship to be given to this high school up in Newark. He wants to give a chance to a kid at his former high school to be able to go to college. He has named the scholarship the Ronald Griffen scholarship. Ronald Griffen is the person David thinks about when he goes to his place of thanksgiving. Because when he goes to his place of thanksgiving he thinks back to the night in 1986 when he was 16 and he and his friends were goofing around on the streets of Newark and were approached by a gunman intent on robbing them. David and his friends froze when they saw the man's gun and feared that they would be shot. And while they reached into their pockets to give what they had, out of nowhere a stranger approached and tried to intervene with the robber on behalf of the boys. Seconds later shots rang out and the stranger -- Ronald Griffen -- lay dying on the sidewalk with the gunman speeding away. The boys ran -- all except David who stayed beside the man who had saved his life. The only words he heard his hero say were, "Please don't let me die here by myself." By the time the ambulance came it was too late.

David Horace will tell you that he is who he is today -- an officer of peace and security -- because he sought to live his life in response to Ronald Griffen's intervening

death. "How could I waste my life," he says, "when a man like him died for me and my friends?" In his place of thanksgiving he's trying to do the right thing.

Oh, and Ronald Griffen? What was he doing trying to stop a robbery? Turns out he had his own Pentecost not long before. Gobbled up by the grace of God, he had turned his life around from some dead ends and wanted his life to be lived for the Savior. How grateful he had become. And was that the spark that placed him between those strange youth and that pointed gun? Who's to know? Truth is Pentecost can happen anywhere and at any time. The Spirit will come when the Spirit wishes to come. But we are bound to find the Spirit in our thanksgiving.

When was the last time you've been to your place of thanksgiving? When was the last time you stopped in the midst of the hustle and bustle and intentionally brought to mind all the things for which you are grateful. Maybe it's your family. Are you grateful for your family? Or maybe a professor or a mentor? Maybe it's the skill you've been given by God that has made you financially secure? Maybe it's the heroes of another generation whose sacrifice has made your freedom possible? Maybe it's your children? Maybe it's your spouse? Maybe it's the Savior? Maybe it's the wheat that grows in the field that you did not plant nor harvest, but that you will soon ingest. "We drink from wells we did not dig," so we are told in Deuteronomy, "and we are warmed by fires we did not kindle."

What would life be like if you took yourself to that place every day for just a little bit of time and thanked the good Lord for all those wells from which you have drunk? Wells you did not dig. And in that place to find the fire you did not kindle that enflames you to a different life? A life in response to all of what God has done for you? Could you imagine your very own Pentecost?

For it's in these Pentecost places where you and I begin to live a better life.



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Church of the Palms

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