

Acts 2:1-21
I Corinthians 15:1-11

INTRO TO PENTECOST

Do you think I sometimes make things more complicated and difficult than they were before? I think it would be more accurate to say that sometimes I try to give you a clearer picture of what the Christian Life is really like and what it is really about – and that this is sometimes far higher, more exciting, and more challenging and demanding than what some of you are used to hearing. Jesus is not a country bumpkin. Salvation is more than a one-phrase slogan. Conversion is entering into a lifetime pilgrimage, not a thirty-second acknowledgment that we are gracious enough to “accept” the true identity of Jesus.

Sometimes “complicated and difficult” obscures truth. No question about it. We can get lost in details, hidden agendas, superfluous explanations. When “I love you” starts sounding like a legal document full of whereases and wherefores and “the party of the second part hereinafter referred to as the desired object” ... well, you know something has gone awry. At best you are going to end up with a prenuptial agreement instead of a love-bond where “the two shall become one.” When God’s love gets enshrined in creeds and institutions that exclude half the world and leave most of the remaining half nervous-to-terrified that they are going to Hell ... well, you know something has gone awry. At best you are going to end up with an organization full of rules and laws and creeds where everybody tries to act perfect on the outside, instead of a fellowship of sinners who become pilgrims together in the light and grace of the Gospel. Life is full of gobbledygook. When we are busy protecting ourselves and others from what we really mean, truth is not served, even though in the meantime it may make us feel a little safer.

Most of you know by now that I do not make things complicated or difficult in an effort to obscure anything. I work hard to be clear, so that even when I am wrong, you will be able to catch it more quickly and respond accordingly. Some of you, in times past, have wrestled with believing in Easter. The notion that this world is not all there is – that there is a spiritual realm far greater than the physical world we live in, and that Jesus really rose from the dead to prove it and to invite and lead us into a LIFE that matches this greater reality – well,

this notion stops every honest human being somewhere along the line, if they ever truly contemplate taking the Christian Life to heart. Can such a fantastic thing really be true? If we cannot fathom such a thing, we cannot make any further progress on the Christian Way. It does not stop us for good; there is so much evidence that most of us get past the block. Nevertheless, if you do not doubt it, you cannot truly believe it. If you do not doubt it until you start doubting your doubts (as Emerson Fostick liked to say), it never gets real for you. But today is not Easter.

And today, the Sunday before Pentecost, I need to tell you – or remind you – that if you think it is hard to believe in Easter, Easter is duck soup in comparison to Pentecost! Easter is easy, in comparison to Pentecost. Easter is for amateurs, in comparison to Pentecost.

You do not have to *do* anything about Easter. You can admire Jesus from afar. Hooray for Jesus, He conquered sin and death! Maybe there is a future for us after all, but that is in the future. Or maybe not. I know lots of people who believe in Easter and are certain that Jesus rose from the dead, but they do not assume that because of Easter there will be any meaningful new life for them – either here or in some future realm. Some of them are even still afraid that they themselves might go to Hell. *There* is an interesting theology: Jesus came here – taught and healed and preached and prayed, and was crucified and rose again – so I can still go to Hell. And maybe you too.

But then, what if I don't respond right or believe correctly enough, or do enough good deeds to earn or deserve the salvation Jesus brings? You see, no matter what Jesus does or says or wins for us, we go right back to the same old perspective: no Gospel, no trust in His love, no change or switch from fear to gratitude. After all, what have we to do with a person as unique and special and powerful as Jesus? Even Peter and his brother disciples, if you remember, believed in Easter – they were witnesses to the Resurrection, and actually encountered the Risen Lord – yet still they went back to their old lives, still they went back to their fishing. “Hooray for Jesus, but we flunked. It has all passed us by.” And so Jesus had to track them down and convert them all over again. (The Last Breakfast, John 21:1-19)

We cannot get away with any such nonsense when it comes to Pentecost. The coming of the Holy Spirit, no matter how you cut it, is never generic – never just for somebody else – never impersonal. And

it never leaves you alone; it never leaves you out; it never lets you go on with your own life like it was before: business as usual, or just on the weekends, or only when we happen to feel like it. **Pentecost is not a theory, it is an invasion!**

Pentecost is the best or the worst thing we have ever heard of. We still don't have to get too nervous – the invasion does not take place for us unless we want it, unless in some fashion we invite it. But humans are skeptical, for good reason. We do not experience everybody always being honest. That is why we have expressions like, “Never buy a pig in a poke.” The question is: If you invite the Holy Spirit into your life – if you get invaded – can you get loose again if you don't like it? Where is the demo? How about a three-month trial basis?

Relationships don't work that way, do they? You have to go with them, or you cannot find out what they would have been like if you had gone with them – all the way – total commitment. Nearly our entire society has gone to the “demo approach” in marriage. Therefore we have no more divorce. Therefore we have no more broken hearts. Isn't that wonderful! What we do have is a society that plays at marriage, and only a handful stumble into the real experience: for better or worse ... through Hell or high water. “Until death do us part” is not about when it ends; it means, “I'm for you, my love, until or unless they kill me.” (In this world, or the next. The two shall become one.)

Yes, well, we say it without always hearing ourselves very clearly, but the whole Christian Faith thing is about relationship. It is not about law or deal or program, and it is not about attendance, success in this world, or who else agrees. It is about relationship between us and the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ of God. And the truth is, we do not have a lot of information about the people who were invaded by the Holy Spirit and then tried to get out of the relationship after a while. We *do* have quite a bit of information about people who tried the “demo version” – people who turned their wills and their lives over to God on a trial basis. It is called “hypocrisy.” We learn nothing from the hypocrites except how not to do it. The truth is, there is hardly anybody who invited the Holy Spirit in – who got invaded – who did not like it afterward and wanted to get rid of the Spirit. To be fair, there is plenty of evidence that people who did invite the Spirit in got pretty nutso afterward, at least according to any of the logical or rational yardsticks of this world. We flat-out cannot explain the lives

of Spirit-infested people according to the expectations, goals, values, justifications, purposes, or successes that our world teaches and understands. Do you need reminding?

All but one of the twelve (even if you replace Judas with Paul) died as martyrs – violent deaths. Their claim to fame has nothing to do with anything our world comprehends or understands. Luther was an outlaw to both the religious and the political structures of his time all his working life. He did not know on any given morning that he would not be arrested by evening. And the records show that he just barely died before they would have killed him anyway. The list from Jesus until now is incredible. Even the thousands who live so-called “normal” lives are not living lives that make any sense by this world’s standards. They simply have not been caught or called out yet – they have not run afoul of the world’s expectations enough to bring them into the limelight and into the peril. But it could happen at any time.

There is another dimension to Pentecost that is even harder to swallow – harder to truly believe: Jesus is no longer fooling around. As Holy Spirit, He is no longer limited by a physical body. And because of His nature, His love, and His mission and purpose, there is not a single soul on the face of the earth that He is not interested in, walking beside, trying to reach, trying to help – trying to guide, enlighten, comfort, redeem. And it does not matter where they are – their culture, or circumstances, or religion, or present level of spiritual development. *That* is the Christian perspective – the truth that emerges from Pentecost. *That* is what is hard to believe! And of course, we are still in our limited bodies, so this truth tears at our hearts every waking day of our lives. We cannot match this truth. We cannot help everybody, care about everybody, respond to everybody. But we know Jesus does. Only together – only as “the body of Christ” – can we in any way live toward this truth, each of us trying to bring Christ’s quality of love to the situations and circumstances where we find ourselves. And even that requires that He be in charge: that He is the Head of the body, that He directs our lives – not just in the worship services, but every day and all the time. And not just in vague theory or lip-service, but each of us willing to be obedient – doing what He asks of us, and *not* doing what He does not ask of us.

Still, it is hard to believe that even God is vast enough, intelligent enough, aware enough, caring enough that such a thing could be true. Hard to believe that we are getting this much help, yet are still fighting off so much of it that we are constantly in the throes of all the mayhem and evil and stupidity that surround us every day. On the other hand, it is equally difficult to believe that such a high percentage of humans are so noble, conscientious, caring, effective, inspired ... if the Holy Spirit is *not* influencing us in this very fashion. After all, the vast majority of the worst mayhem is accomplished by about ten percent of the population. True, we all contribute to the subtler forms of evil, and they end up devastating too. But nothing in this temporal realm promises perfection.

I used to live in Altadena, up in the foothills north of the Rose Bowl. A ten-minute walk from our house put me where I could look out over the Los Angeles basin and, at night, see the lights of the teeming millions. Sometimes, like many of you, I would find myself pondering the human anthill. It was beautiful and peaceful from afar. But how many people at that very moment were making love? And how many of them were finding it truly beautiful, and loving? And how many were doing so out of wedlock? How many people were drunk, or taking drugs? How many were in a serious argument with their spouse? How many were at that very moment telling lies, or stealing something, or contemplating vengeance? How many were crying, or lonely beyond the telling? How many children were frightened, or feeling abandoned? How many people were feeling like their lives were over, or useless? How many were in the grip of some terrible fear, or knowing that some calamity was rushing toward them? Of course, the answer was, "Thousands." At any given moment – thousands! And this was only one basin – one pocket of civilization in a very big world. And when I could not face it any longer, I could always go back to my house or to the church and drown it out in my own interests and activities. But what about the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is not just out on a distant hill but is face-to-face with all of it, all the time. To the Holy Spirit, every one of the teeming millions is a precious child. And the Spirit could do so much to help if only we would listen – if only He could get through.

But most will not listen. And only a handful of those who *will* listen will do so regularly or with any consistency. And only a handful of *those* folk will obey the guidance even when they know what is being

asked of them. Yet nearly everyone is eager and willing to blame God whenever they do not like what is happening – whenever life gets hard for them.

Easter is easy in comparison to Pentecost. If you go with Pentecost – if you get invaded – you are in on the game, part of the Story – part of the Kingdom – trying to help. Oh, not trying to help by solving the world's problems or by trying to fix all the people. I did not say anything about losing all our humility. The Holy Spirit is the One with the power and the wisdom to help. We only help by getting people to listen to the Spirit for themselves. We do not try to take over people's lives or run their lives for them. That is the other "church" – the hypocrites. There is only one HEAD, and we are not it! That is another thing that makes Pentecost hard to believe. Pentecost is surrounded by peace, and *patience* ... humility, and *patience* ... trust, and *patience* ... obedience, and *patience* – things our world barely knows and never believes in.

Easter is easy in comparison to Pentecost. One of the best proofs of this is that Pentecost is so widely ignored in most churches. Even when it is not obliterated by Children's Day or Awards Sunday, it is frequently ignored or mentioned so lightly that it has no place in most people's awareness of the Christian Story. Did we have to put up extra chairs this morning? Did people come flocking to churches across the land this morning, like they do on Easter? Most of Christendom goes from Christmas to Easter and then stops for the year, as if Easter were the culmination – as if Jesus rising from the dead were the point and purpose of the whole Christian affair. And so we never come into the drama. We never "close the loop." We never know why He really came. You think Jesus was sent by God to go through all the mayhem – to get crucified and rise again – just to show off?! Whee, look at me! More to the point, if you know and believe that Jesus rose from the dead, does that somehow tell you all you need to know about what to do with *your* life, or how to proceed, or where to get personal comfort and courage and guidance?

What a travesty – to tell the wondrous story and then leave out the best part! It does not go from Incarnation to Resurrection. It goes from Incarnation to Infusion ... Invasion! ... PENTECOST! It calls you into the drama, and builds you into everything Jesus came for and is trying to accomplish here. Like you really *are* supposed to be part of

“the body of Christ” or something! Like you *are* supposed to be in direct communication with the Holy Spirit of the Risen Lord – on a daily basis. Like your whole life is to be impacted and inspired and led and changed by Jesus. Like you will actually experience the New Life in Christ Jesus until you come to trust it so much that you will be eager – passionate – to tell, teach, and persuade others to try it too. Can you imagine?!

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of Pentecost. Pentecost is the coming of the Holy Spirit, and that is never just “about” the early church or “about” the Christian Life. IT **IS** THE LIFE! “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*” That does not happen until Pentecost! Without Pentecost, the Word became flesh and dwelt among a tiny handful of people in one tiny corner of the world, for about three years about two thousand years ago. And for a whole lot of people, that is all Christianity is about, and just about all it is worth. Nobody is going to defy “the way of the world” – never mind Satan or all their own personal demons and terrors – for three years of ancient history.

The truth is, everything Jesus did – everything He went through, and the reason for His coming in the first place – all of it was leading up to Pentecost. Not Easter, not Christmas – Pentecost: the chance for Him to be with you ... to help, to guide, to forgive ... to redeem and save and love each and every one of you.

Oh, dear friends, close the loop! In Pentecost, the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ comes to set us free from sin and death ... free to belong to Christ and His Kingdom ... free to live a very beautiful, limitless, and joyful LIFE – LIFE neither known nor comprehended by this world, but true LIFE indeed. Take down the double shields and fears and doubts that stand between you and God, and Pentecost will pour into you also. It is not a theory. It is not a belief. It is an **INVASION!**

PRAYER

You who wait and watch in this moment, and in all our moments, while our minds click through their tiny cycles of fear and faith, doubt and despair – while our hearts beat time to our trust and mistrust, sometimes with passion, sometimes in despair ...

You who art Thou – the Creator, the unknown, the all-knowing, the Eternal – You who came down! Down all the speechless corridors of eternity and time and space – down to the dust and blood and strife – down to us, that we might know You ...

You, Eternal Christ, who came to reveal to us love and hope, reveal it again this day, we pray, in our surrender to Your guidance, in our realization of entering Your Forever. Amen.