

John 14
John 6:25-29

INSIDE PENTECOST

Pentecost is the true Second Coming. That other “Second Coming” most often talked about in the church is a huge blunder – a mistake that has been throwing countless people off the real Message of the Gospel, and off the Christian Path, for generations. I have been trying to preach and teach the incredible significance of Pentecost for at least thirty years now. But in the face of Hal Lindsay, and now *Left Behind*, it is like a voice crying in the wilderness. The truth will still win in the end. Jesus returns to us as the Holy Spirit. Christianity is not about waiting for the Second Coming to close out life on earth. Christianity is about following the guidance of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ with increasing love and obedience – as the love-bond between us and Jesus grows stronger and clearer all the time. Of course, the love-bond between us and others who walk and experience this New Way of Life grows stronger all the time too – which is the real meaning and purpose of the church. In contrast to robes and bishops and creeds and religious entertainment, and trying to be big and successful in the outer world.

Each of us experiences life on this planet for a relatively short time. For that reason, “He is coming soon” is always true and relevant for us on an individual basis. The misunderstanding of the early church – that life on earth as we know it is about to end – does not really throw off our personal perspective by very much. What throws off perspective is all the Hell, punishment, fear, and damnation that have been added in to overlay the Gospel Message. Today, thousands of Christians actually fear the Last Judgment – instead of paying attention to the daily judgment. The early Christians had no such dread. They could hardly wait! Any time Jesus came, any way He wanted to come, was the very best thing they could imagine. *Maranatha* – “Come Lord Jesus.” They thought life apart from Jesus was the trial and the pits. In Jesus’ presence, everything would be straightened out, and everything would be wonderful.

What has also thrown off Christian perspective is the implication that maybe we do not have to take this world very seriously because it is about to end anyway. Therefore most of Christendom has not taken vocatio very much to heart. Evangelism, “conversion,” and “loving your

neighbor” have been corrupted into very shallow, short-range, picayune versions of their true meanings and intent. All of this comes from not knowing the significance of Pentecost. All of this comes from substituting the apocalyptic expectations that humans already had, before Jesus came, for the Message Jesus actually brought: that He was coming again as Holy Spirit to be with each one of us. Substituting the incredible promise of love, comfort, peace, and presence for the pictures of a wrathful, vengeful Jesus coming to kill and throw into Hell all the people who have not understood or acknowledged Him, *that* reeks of Satan – and of humans trying to control other humans, instead of showing them light and truth.

It is less important in its repercussions, perhaps, but the apocalyptic picture is that we all lie in the grave until the Second Coming – until the “Last Judgment” – and then we all come out of the grave to be “processed.” And if we make it, we then take our places in a Heaven that is a reconstituted earth, where everything is “perfect,” and nothing exciting ever happens again through all eternity. I don’t know about you, but that is a pathetically small hope in comparison to what Jesus is telling us and inviting us into. In one of His parables, Jesus pictured Abraham already in Heaven. At the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah were already alive, and they came to visit with Jesus from the other realm. The thief on the other cross was promised, *“This day you will be with me in paradise.”* Jesus taught that *“God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.”* Jesus did not hold the minuscule, “steady-state” picture of Life or Heaven that was common in His time. But His promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit was muted and distorted because even His followers were holding onto the familiar notions of their time about what life was like, and how God would send a Messiah to stop all the evil and bring us to the “End of the Age” and the beginning of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. If the coming of the Holy Spirit was only about a few short years, then that was certainly helpful for that interim period – as Paul and Peter and others proved. They truly lived in constant contact with the Holy Spirit. But the Closing of the Age was the big deal – the big focus. The coming of the Holy Spirit was just an interim period – a stop-gap measure to get them over the few short years between Resurrection and the sounding of the Great Trumpet. Pentecost was very nice and they could not have survived without it, but they still saw it as a sideshow, not the main event.

That may have been an understandable error for the early disciples. But that is no longer believable for us. We know now that they were wrong about the timeline. They have all died, and life here has not closed down. The promise of the Holy Spirit is HUGE! It is not the sideshow, it is the main event! Everything Jesus set up and led into depends upon the presence of the Holy Spirit carrying it through. That is what Christianity is about, and what Jesus' coming was leading up to. It is not a quickie – “Accept the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” It is A WAY OF LIFE, wherein we and all Christians around us are living in obedience to the guidance and comfort and peace and love of the Holy Spirit – in a world that goes on and on, generation after generation. And we try to honor the New Way with our lives *today* (as the early Christians certainly did also), but we also take seriously the conditions and landmarks that we set up, both now and for the generations still to come. It did not dawn on the early Christians until toward the end of the first century that there would be any generations still to come. Like it or not, it is a major perspective change between us and Peter, Paul, John, and the rest. They never worried about what life would be like here for their grandchildren. We do. And if we do not, we are not being faithful.

Okay, so last week we celebrated the coming of Pentecost. And it was wonderful. This week we get to *think* about Pentecost. Guess what? Celebrating is more fun than thinking! But if we do not get our minds straight too, it makes it easier for Satan and the world to steal it all away from us again. Well, thinking can be fun too, but I am after the bigger picture, so hopefully you will come with me, and go back to consider the details later.

Jesus does not create – Jesus reveals. *God* creates. Why start here? Because Christians have a bad habit of trying to fit everything into the Jesus story. I do too, because it reveals so much. But Jesus reveals, He does not create. He does not come out of nowhere, and everything He says and does is clarifying what already is – not starting over from scratch. “*In the beginning was the Word,*” and John tracks it down to when the Word becomes flesh and comes to us as Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus does not invent God. Jesus does not invent the Holy Spirit. Jesus reveals. It is always bigger than our creeds and explanations. And always it has been the purpose of God – from the beginning, not just since the founding of the Christian church. The Holy Spirit gives birth to the church, the church does not give birth

to the Spirit. Even though the purpose of the church is to be guided and directed by the Spirit, the work of the Spirit is never confined to the church. We chide Judaism because, despite its own prophets, it so often did not realize or act like God cared about *all* the people of the world and not just the Jews. And then we make the same mistake – bigger, worse, and more often than they did. Christianity is not about the institutional church. The institutional church is supposed to be about Christianity. God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, salvation, Heaven, eternal life – and faithful, loving people – are ALWAYS bigger than the Christian church as understood by our world, or as understood by the institutional church itself. It is jarring, but even though the world and Satan have it locked down now – us against them in most places – Christianity is not for Christians. Christianity – the presence of the Holy Spirit with each and every one of us – is for *everyone*. Christians are only those who have realized that this is so – and realizing it, eagerly and willingly spread it to others.

Jesus saves by reconciling – by restoring us to trust and love in our relationship with God. Humans are in bondage to Satan’s view of reality. That is, they are cut back, held back, corrupted by fear, guilt, anger, loneliness, suspicion – which leads to many aberrations and much unworthy behavior. The Cross takes away the barriers between us and God. It is not about some kind of blood-magic. It is not about some mysterious way in which the Cross protects us from the wrath or anger of God because we are so imperfect and God is so holy. Life is full of mystery, and Christianity has more than its share of mystical power and spiritual principles that we never fully fathom. But the only mystery about the Cross is: Why would Jesus go through with it – and why would God ever love us so much in the first place?

Life is hard, and full of sorrow and pain. And all of us, in the name of ourselves and our loved ones, have “issues” with the God who created this place and put us here. Whoever created this place seems to us like a hard taskmaster. Incredibly hard! If, despite this reality, we trust the evidence of the Cross that God loves us – and loves us this much – then whether we understand everything else or not, we are reconciled to God. Whatever God’s reasons for designing this place – and knowing we need the experiences we go through here – if God loves us this much, then we can trust him and love him back. In the end we will understand. In any case, Jesus does not invent this love. He reveals it – embodies it – acts it out.

If then a new trust replaces our fear and anger toward God, we can then accept the offer of the Holy Spirit's presence – turn our wills and our lives over to the subtle, interior, but still incredible communication of the Holy Spirit. “Communication” is a feeble word, but it will have to do for the moment. Jesus *is* the Holy Spirit who comes to us after the Resurrection. Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Then Word became Spirit to dwell *with* us – to inspire, guide, comfort, and direct us – each of us individually, for the duration. “*Lo, I am with you always ...*”

But it still is not easy, or clear, for so many of us. And there are reasons for that, which I want to talk to you about. Meanwhile, the Spirit has reason to say to *us*: “Why are you fighting me? Why are you so often trying to ignore me? I can help. I can save – not in the evangelism sense, in the *real* sense. But only if you listen, follow, obey, trust.”

So if we ourselves are awake to this incredible reality, we start tracking the whole faith story in a different awareness. The Holy Spirit has *always* been at work! How else to explain the baptism of Jesus, the Damascus Road, the Resurrection appearances, Peter and Cornelius, Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, and on and on. And Pentecost – and the mushrooming of the early church, with more and more people turning their lives over to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So often I wonder how people explain to themselves the spread of Christianity through the Roman Empire in those early days of the church. I can only conclude that they do not think about it much at all. They do not try to understand how such a thing could have happened in our world. Either that or they give more credence to sheer magic than I ever have. Especially if you add in all the resistance, denial, and animosity that went to war against this new truth – from Satan, from the Hellenistic religions, from the Jews, from within the church itself.

But back to the new awareness of the Spirit's presence in our world. It was not, repeat *not*, a new factor in the world. Remember John's words: “*In the beginning was the Word ...*” The Preexistent Christ was always here, long before Jesus came to reveal it – to make it clearer and more available to all of us ... though that is obviously still a work in progress.

Abraham left Ur – left his country and his familiar religion – and ended up starting a whole new religion. Where was that coming from?

Why did he spare Isaac against all the truth he had been taught? Why was he making covenant with this unseen influence of some new, hitherto unknown God? It makes no sense! Except now we get it ... it was the Holy Spirit.

What about Jacob's ladder? Or Jacob wrestling with the angel? What about Moses and the burning bush? Or Moses leading the people out of Egypt against all odds? Or the Covenant on Mount Sinai? What about Samuel as a little boy in the temple, hearing the voice calling his name though the entire temple establishment had gone so corrupt that the temple was the least godly place in all Israel? What about Elijah in the cave on Mount Sinai? And on and on ...

People keep trying to divide off the Old Testament from the New Testament as if there were no connection or continuity between them. As if it were a great rift instead of an ongoing story of God's revealing: the New fulfilling the Old – taking its bearings, its foundations, and all the inspiration and purpose and light from the Old ... and moving on into New dimensions and New promises.

The church does not “own” the Spirit. The Spirit created the church. And to this day, the Spirit tries to direct the church, which means, of course, to direct the lives of the people of the church. But all too often, the people are unwilling to be directed. And part of the problem is that many forces, even within the church itself, try to prevent us from claiming this New Life. In any case, Christianity does not own the Holy Spirit, though constantly it tries to talk as if it does. The Holy Spirit created Christianity – and often it must grieve that it did! And so now we must add another dimension.

What about Cyrus, the King of Persia, who restored Israel when all seemed lost? What about Jethro, the priest of Midian, who helped Moses so much? What about Melchizedek, King of Salem, who surprised us in the story of Abraham? What about Ruth, who came out of Moab and became the great, great, great grandmother of King David? What about Muhammad, or Constantine, or the Emperor Asoka, or Gandhi? Or any of the great Christians who do not start out as Christians but come from so many different lands and cultures yet end up converting to Christianity? To be sure, we could never expect a non-Christian to agree, but how could any *Christian* not realize that all of it is coming from the influence of the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit creates the church, not the other way around! We keep thinking and

talking as if Christianity were about the church and came out of the church. The church is what comes out of Christianity – or more accurately, the Holy Spirit creates the church. And not just back then somewhere. *Always*. Wherever there is Pentecost, the church is coming into being. And wherever there is no Pentecost, there is no church. Though sometimes the remains of one are visible for a while longer.

The church keeps talking as if it invented the Holy Spirit, and as if it can control what the Spirit can and cannot do – and with whom, and for what purposes. So in many places and cases down through the generations, the church has actually claimed that our first loyalty is to church doctrine and tradition. Obedience first to church authority, then let the Holy Spirit guide you – if any time or thought or possibility is left over.

And so the Great Message is muted, and the institutions that are built to carry it weaken and die. We keep going back to how it was before we knew the Spirit. Christianity is turned from fire to ice – and from Gospel back into Law.

It is just a reminder. There is great resistance to and animosity toward the promise of the Holy Spirit. Hearing, each in our own language, is a comprehension – a true knowing of the presence and inward communication of the Holy Spirit. Why is this fulfillment of the Christian Story so muted and so little known? Why is it that the Christian church has so rarely closed the loop, and so tentatively spoken of the Life In Christ Jesus that Pentecost proclaims and promises?

Part of it is The Adversary. Satan clouds it and mutes it in every way he can. If you were Satan, you would too. How else to keep us in bondage? What chance has Satan got if we all start getting truly attentive and tuning our souls to the inner voice of the Holy Spirit, even checking our everyday choices and decisions with our Risen Lord?

But that is not all. Life lived in response, in obedience, in the joy and delight of Christ's personal caring and guidance ... is truly dangerous. Some people, as we all know, abuse this perspective terribly. There is, as a matter of fact, nothing good on earth that humans do not abuse. "The Devil made me do it" is tame in comparison to "God told me to do it." We all know horror stories of people doing fiendish things in the name of obedience to God. Religion can easily become just one more lever – one more tool or trick – for trying to control the

people around us, or for trying to excuse what we ourselves have already decided to do.

And so of course, this abuse is often used to mute or discredit life lived under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. How we love to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Prayer can be abused, so everybody should stop praying. Sex can be abused, so everybody should become rigid and frigid. Money can be abused, so all “really truly Christians” should give it all away. Astrology can be abused, so no Christian should have anything to do with it. The logic is pathetic but familiar. Prayer can be abused, no question about it. So pray rightly and stay humble, and when you invite the Holy Spirit to direct and be in charge of your life, really mean it – do not just use it as a ploy or a lever for your own ends. The higher the gift, the more damage it can do if we misuse it. At least that is what my mother taught us. So use it for its true purpose; do not just throw it away. Which she also tried to teach us.

Finally, and I am sorry to have to say it, but the structures of most Christian institutions mute the Message of Pentecost – the Message of Prayer, the Message of Gospel over Law, the Message of Life In Christ Jesus – because if we become truly obedient to the Holy Spirit, we will not always be obedient to the traditions, structures, leaders, or directives of the institutional church. Almost everywhere you go in structured Christendom, you will quickly be told, in ways subtle or overt, that individual prayer is dangerous and not to be trusted. It is okay in moderation, and as long as it is practiced within the confines of the Bible, accepted theology, church tradition, and the creeds, and with the approval of the priests and ministers. *Then* it is okay. And if you press it, you will be told with greater and greater emphasis that your own personal prayer life in obedience to the Holy Spirit is not to be trusted. If you don’t believe me, try it. And we need to add: This, despite the fact that every important breakthrough of our Faith, every important leader we admire and respect, came out of the Prayer Place – out of obedience to the Holy Spirit despite all objections from Scripture, tradition, religious authorities, creeds, or the accepted theology of their time.

Jesus Himself is the top example, but far from the only example. Do you remember Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)? She had to constantly hide the fact that she had a rich, dramatic, personal prayer life instead of just doing the rote prayers that were allowed. What was at stake?

Her life! She would have gone to the stake – literally – under the Inquisition if her true prayer life had been discovered. Yet there were nuns and novices under her who needed to know what it could really be like. So she walked the razor’s edge. And if she were here today, she would say to you: “My God, you can pray without risking your life – and you don’t even bother?! Unbelievable!”

Still, Pentecost really is dangerous. In Pentecost, and ever since, Jesus comes to each and every follower – personally, powerfully, and from then on. It is not a one-time event. It establishes the link, the relationship, the communication between the Holy Spirit and each individual who will invite and allow it – and from then on for the rest of their lives. It was what Jesus was after from the beginning. It was the true purpose of His coming.

Finally, one last but very important thing for us to remember about Pentecost. Do you recall the instruction Jesus gave to His disciples before the Day of Pentecost? *“Behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high.”* (Luke 24:49 RSV) *“Wait until you have been armed with power from above.”* (REB)

It will not do us any good to go on without the Holy Spirit. That is what we cannot seem to get through our thick heads. This New Life in Christ Jesus is not something we can induce, control, choreograph, or make happen our way. We must wait to be clothed with power from on high. But we will not wait! We are busy. We have our own agendas. We have much to accomplish. We know time and life are passing us by. We have much to prove, and much to make up for. So we keep rushing off to do it our own way, according to our own best light.

But the Spirit waits to see: Do we really mean it? Are we really ready to follow and obey? Fifty days from Easter to Pentecost ... What was the Spirit waiting for? Do you imagine that the Spirit did not know how painful this waiting was for Peter and James and John and the others?

They kept meeting, and praying, and talking, and voting, and making little choices – like, who would take the place of Judas. And how many did the Spirit lose during this waiting period? Half of them?

Wait until you are clothed! Do not just rush into the world naked except for your own strength and wisdom. And when the impatience had finally run its course and the remaining disciples had fought through all their pride and impatience and eagerness until they were finally ready to settle down – to truly listen and obey – *then the fire fell!*

Pentecost is truly incredible, astounding, and amazing. But what is the most important thing for us to remember about Pentecost when it comes to our own lives and our own purposes? Don't just do something – stand there. Wait! *“They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.”* Wait until you are clothed with the Spirit. Don't just make it up, or pretend, or outline all the steps and purposes that God needs to approve and help you with. Don't go anywhere without the Spirit. Don't do anything without the Spirit. Wait until you are clothed with power from on high.

PRAYER

Great Spirit, we know that we have no constancy by which to match a virtue as big as patience. Certainly not in any absolute way. We have long since stopped trusting in our virtues anyway. It is *Your* virtue and *Your* constancy that we trust. If You do not keep calling us back from our distractions ... finding us when we get lost ... loving us when we feel absolutely worthless ... forgiving us when we forget You – then there is no hope for us.

But we would love to learn more patience toward You – if we could still be covered by Your mercy. We want to learn faithfulness as You have shown it to us ... compassion as You have demonstrated it for us ... Life as You have revealed it to us.

We know that we have crashed a lot of gates that You never opened for us. And a lot of gates that You *did* open for us, we would not walk through. So we are happy to realize and remember that we are still “in training.” Thank You for this helpful training camp in which we find ourselves. And thank You even more for staying with us. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.