

Pentecost: A reason for rejoicing in a broken world

Deut. 16:9-12, Jn. 4, Heb. 10:5-16

David C. Dixon

Introduction: What's the big deal about Pentecost? It seems that a lot of Christian traditions don't give it much importance. It's not like the Holy Spirit has to come again to take possession of the church! No, but we do need the reminder that the church is *not ours!* It belongs to Him, and apart from Him there is no spiritual power; we can do nothing worthwhile on our own, nothing of lasting value. So on Pentecost we stop to remember that *the revelation was threefold* ... not because we worship three gods, but because our God is three-in-one! At the Exodus, God the Father made Himself known to the Israelites as a people; in the Incarnation God the Son was revealed; and at Pentecost the Person and work of the Holy Spirit were fully disclosed. So **God defies our logic**, He will not fit into our neatly packaged logical categories: He is confessed as Father and Son at the same time (1 Jn. 2:23), sharing one Breath, the Bond between them (1 Cor. 12:3). Our God speaks, He is not silent, and His Word and His Breath are as completely divine as the Speaker Himself.

Our Scripture reading for today actually referred to this day as the "Feast of Weeks," so why is it called Pentecost? The expression Feast of Weeks is due to the instruction in Lev. 23 about counting off seven weeks from the morning after the Sabbath of Passover, so fifty days in all since Passover (Greek *pentekostés* means 50th). This was specifically designed by the Lord so that Pentecost would fall on Sunday, the first day of the week, when Jesus would reveal His triumph over death. So from the Old Testament background, we discover the reasons why God ordered the Israelites to celebrate this festival, specifically for bringing in the firstfruits of their harvest and rejoicing in those firstfruits. Hence, it was a kind of early Thanksgiving feast, anticipating that the God who provided those firstfruits would also give the rest of the harvest at the proper time.

1) This was the primary command for that day: to bring a free will offering *in proportion to the blessings* the Lord had given (this is what the Lord still expects of us as we support His work). The second command was to "rejoice before the Lord," which practically speaking was about enjoying a meal together among the extended family. This communion would include parents, sons and daughters, male and female servants, the local Levite, foreigners, orphans, and widows – what a mixed crowd! They would eat abundantly and enjoy fresh cooked meat – not an everyday event, so this was a real celebration! This was communion at its best for the Israelites, but it was also a parable of the deeper communion we're taught to enjoy in the Lord, *feasting our souls* on His goodness, His truth and grace! So this worship – both individual and collective – is actually the true fulfillment of that OT feast, because the Holy Spirit is Himself the "firstfruits" of our inheritance in Christ – the promise that some day (when our groaning is finished and our adoption complete, Rom. 8:23), we will know the full presence of our Savior and His glory. Meanwhile, Paul explains how our groaning is part of creation's groaning, but

we're not alone in it! The Holy Spirit also groans with us and on our behalf! He is our great reason for rejoicing now – rejoicing in the firstfruits!

But let's stop and think about this a moment: what were these people really like? Were they just robots going through the motions of legalistic routines? Were they just pious Israelites always content to obey God's law and bring their offerings to Jerusalem? Let's get real here. Did any of them ever get angry at someone? Like something might happen on the way to Jerusalem that got someone really cross. How do you feast and rejoice when you're really mad at somebody? Or we could imagine someone who just had a bad day, lots of things going wrong, relationships edgy, a troubled spirit, plans not lining up, everything harder than it should be. You realize these were people just like you and me! They had to travel for miles on foot to get to Jerusalem, they had to fulfill all kinds of ritual laws of cleanliness, they had to bring provisions and sacrifices, etc. A lot of work went into those pilgrimages, and people could get into conflicts, tempers could flare, parents with children, children among themselves, married couples, besides the fact they all had problems of their own! They were real people who struggled and groaned both physically and emotionally. And this command to just rejoice? What if I don't feel like it? What if I'm in pain, sorrow, anguish? Isn't this more like the way we come to church sometimes? How do you come to church? All happy and bubbly all the time? I remember childhood experiences that were off the charts with arguing and fussing and bickering ... Their challenges were not so different from ours, nor ours from theirs! We all have issues; we come into His presence with all our baggage – and we need to confess that, be transparent! All of life is designed to push us toward God's presence and into His arms! We need Him so badly! His grace and truth! Enjoying a big family meal that the men had to cook was a great comfort!

The third command said to remember where God had brought them from: bondage, slavery in Egypt! In fact, that is where God has rescued us from as well (bondage to our sin, our false worship). This morning we'll also take time to *remember* in our (symbolic) communal meal. Celebrating the feast according to God's instruction was intended to motivate the Israelites to obedience so that they would be careful to keep God's statutes, and thereby provide a true testimony to the nations of who He is and what He is like!

2) All this was to be done at the place the Lord chose for His name to dwell, or reside (from the Hebrew root שָׁכַן = *shakan*, Deut. 16:11, the same root as the word for tabernacle). The tabernacle in the wilderness would be the first place where God's name would "dwell" among human society. The Israelites were not to do their sacrifices just anywhere, but only in the place God established, because His Name is holy and they needed to learn the deep truth of His perfect personhood, becoming students of His Word and His Ways. So you remember how King David longed to establish that place of more permanent residence for God's Name, which would be the temple in Jerusalem built by his son Solomon. Yet centuries later Jesus would teach the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn. 4) that this arrangement was not permanent – it would be replaced by "Spirit and truth" as the guiding principles in worship – no longer having to do with geography, but with faith in Jesus as Messiah and Savior. This means that starting at Pentecost, believers who confess Jesus as Lord became the site He chooses as the "dwelling place for His name!"

Remember Psalm 90? It's where Moses said that the Lord Himself was our dwelling place; but since Pentecost the Holy of Holies now finds His most appropriate and desired dwelling in the humble hearts of Jesus' followers, forgiven and made holy by His personal sacrifice on our behalf. God's true delight was never in sacrifices, burnt offerings, or sin offerings (Heb. 10:8, quoting Ps. 40). ***"Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this Priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God"*** (Heb. 10:11-12). Why was this Priest's sacrifice effective? Because He was *acting out* God's forgiveness personally, making it effective *in situ*! In His own flesh, even as that worst of all crimes was being committed against Him! So God's delight was in that One who came to do His will: to love God above everything else, and to love neighbors as

Himself to the utmost degree. Jesus' will, always inclined toward His Father's, is what actually *makes us holy*: by that one offering – submitting Himself to suffer our rebellion and wrath, during which He never stopped forgiving! In other words, by not counting our sins against us, He thereby made perfect for all time those who were being made holy (v. 14). Christ our Holy One was making us temples for His Holy Spirit – the dwelling place of God! This was sanctification He accomplished simply by forgiving, wiping away the sins, removing them as far as the east is from the west, and then doing what he says in vv. 15-16: the Holy Spirit testifies of the new covenant by which His law would be written in our hearts and on our minds (as the prophet Jeremiah had said, Jer. 31:33).

This was not about having a list of laws and rules written on the walls of your brain that you would then have to consult on every occasion imaginable. It was about assimilating from the Spirit the kind of relating that honors God and expresses respect and love for fellow humans! The rejection of God's authority is what makes us want to manipulate fellow humans for our own ends, or simply ignore them altogether. Selfishness and false worship are what lead to all kinds of abusive behavior. But where Jesus rules, sin no longer dominates our inner being. And no longer governed by the letter of the law that kills, but by the Spirit who gives life, that's where God's grace and truth can guide us to relate in healthy ways, so we're motivated to love those around us, to understand their pain and difficulties, to identify with them and their needs.

3) Let's go back to that idea of "deeper communion" a moment as we get ready to enjoy this meal together. How do you feast your soul on the Lord? I want the background noise in my heart to be stilled – all the personal ambitions, anxieties, animosities, ambivalence, angers. So this is the time to stop and confess my failures, my fears, my sense of inadequacy, my tendency to seek my deep comfort in my old ways. I only want to hear God's breathing in my ear, His Word flooding my mind! As we approach this table, I want to remember this is a parable of the deeper communion we're invited to enjoy in the Lord, with our minds set on the things of the Spirit, who wants to transform all our negative emotions into pathways for Jesus to walk through. The bread and cup are the symbols – not the real thing!

As we partake of this **bread**, may it be for us a symbol of renewed commitment to nourish our souls daily on His truth, to spend time meditating on His Word, contemplating His cross, laying our burdens at His feet, savoring His resurrected presence with us. This is what it means to be a Christian – to follow Jesus!

As we partake of this **cup**, may it be for us a symbol of renewed commitment to being transformed into His likeness, so that we can represent Him to those around us, help to bear their burdens, call them to the same repentance and surrender that has brought us life in Jesus. This is what it means to live in the Kingdom of God, under the rule of Jesus, here and now! May we rejoice in the firstfruits – the Holy Spirit – who makes all of this real in us!