

From Graduation to Commencement, Part 2: Pentecost
Sermon on Acts 2:1-15, 22-24, 33, 36, 41-47 (5/23 & 5/24/15)
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This is a big weekend. In the life of our nation, of course, it's Memorial Day weekend – a time when we honor those who lost their lives in service to our country...a time when we give thanks for those who are willing to serve *and* to sacrifice for a calling that is bigger than themselves.

In the life of the *church* – all churches – this weekend is significant because it's Pentecost. In The United Methodist Church *specifically* it's also the celebration of Aldersgate Day. We'll get back to Pentecost in a bit...but, first, let's talk about Aldersgate Day. It may be an unfamiliar celebration to many of you. But it's a good one to know about.

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In The United Methodist Church, we celebrate May 24th because it marks what we call Aldersgate Day. Back in 1738, John Wesley – one of the founders of our denomination – was feeling deeply insecure about his salvation and about whether or not God was actually working in his life.

John Wesley was a pastor in the Church of England and started a movement within the Church of England that eventually became The United Methodist Church. In 1738, however, Wesley was in a season of doubt after some major disappointments in life and ministry.

John Wesley's ministry was all about helping Christians become more enthusiastic in the way they lived their faith...and this was not being received by everyone in the way he hoped it would be received. Plus, around this time back in 1738, he'd made a mess of a significant romantic relationship...so, Mr. Wesley was struggling.

He was feeling lost...wondering if God really did love him, concerned that perhaps Jesus really hadn't saved him.

In his despair, on May 24th of 1738, John Wesley decided to go to a Bible study that was taking place on Aldersgate Street in London. While at this study, someone read from Martin Luther's preface to the book of Romans...and, while this person was reading Luther's words, John Wesley felt his heart was “strangely warmed.”

As quoted from one of his journals, John Wesley wrote about this experience, saying, “In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter of nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt *my* heart strangely warmed.

“I felt I did trust in Christ, in Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”¹

If you have been around The United Methodist Church for a while, it's possible you've heard someone jokingly refer to their heart being “strangely warmed.” The implication of this phrase is that a sort of significant spiritual experience happened to them. You may know what this is like:

You're singing a favorite hymn or song in worship, or a speaker says something in a particular way, or you read a powerful piece of writing, or you're out experiencing the majesty of Creation, and suddenly you *feel* God's presence. Your throat catches...your eyes well with tears... you get goosebumps – maybe it even feels like your heart warms.

Somehow, in some mysterious way, in those moments, you know God is communicating with you. On May 24th of 1738, the phrase John Wesley used to describe this sort of experience was the phrase, “I felt my heart strangely warmed.”

“I felt my heart strangely warmed.”

This is a story from our Methodist heritage that communicates a profoundly personal experience of God's love and mercy. And, as these experiences often are for us, this experience in John Wesley's life proved to be a major turning point.

Having been assured of God's love and mercy, his passion for ministry was reignited and he continued his work of energizing the church – both in England and in what would become The United States. In so many ways, The United Methodist Church exists as a result of John Wesley's “heart-warming” experience on Aldersgate Street in London almost exactly 277 years ago.

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Now, the focus of today's message and worship service is Pentecost, not Aldersgate Day. However, while Aldersgate Day is not our ultimate focus today, it's actually a pretty great connection to Pentecost.

After all, on Aldersgate Day, John Wesley's heart was “strangely warmed” and, on *Pentecost*, the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples like wind and fire. And you better believe the disciples' hearts were strangely warmed when *that* happened!

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As you can see by the title of today's sermon, we're on part two of a sermon series called “From Graduation to Commencement.”

1 As told at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aldersgate_Day. Emphasis added.

This is a three-week series we started last week...and we're using this series to frame three significant holy days in the Church:

Ascension – which we celebrated last weekend – Pentecost – which we're celebrating today – and Holy Trinity – which we'll honor next weekend. *From Graduation to Commencement.*

Last week, as we explored the story of Jesus' ascension into heaven, we thought about how, like *graduation*, the ascension of Jesus was an ending. To graduate from something is to finish it, to complete it.

Graduation marks a significant ending – and Jesus' ascension into heaven was like Graduation Day for his first disciples. They had spent their time and energy learning all they could from Jesus...when he ascended into heaven, he was no longer physically present with them to be that in-person teacher. So that day marked a significant ending for the disciples.

But, it was also a shift toward the beginning of something new because Ascension Day was the transition for the disciples from being the *students*, to becoming the teachers. Disciples to *apostles*.

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Now...the book of Acts – also called *The Acts of the Apostles* – is a narrative much like the four Gospels. However, while the Gospels tell the stories of Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection, the book of Acts tells the story of what Jesus' earliest disciples did *after* Jesus was raised from the dead and had ascended into heaven.

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his disciples to remain in Jerusalem and to wait until the Holy Spirit came to bless them. After that, the disciples were to be witnesses of Jesus Christ from Jerusalem, throughout Israel, to the ends of the earth.

On Ascension Day – the disciples' “Graduation Day” – Jesus gave his them the task of telling the whole world about him...and this task was to begin after he sent the Spirit to bless them from on high.

What happened in the first part of today's reading from Acts chapter 2 is the story of the disciples receiving that big, Holy Spirit blessing – the blessing needed in order for them to *commence* their mission of sharing the good news of Jesus to all the world.

“Commencement” is the beginning of something...and when Jesus ascended into heaven, while it *did* mark an ending – a graduation, per se – it also marked the shift toward a beginning. And that beginning officially *began* when the Spirit descended upon the disciples in the story from Acts 2...the story of Pentecost – the “commencement” story of the church. An ending into a beginning.

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So, yes, today *is* the church holiday we call Pentecost and its origin story is in chapter 2 of the book of Acts.

Frankly, it's a weird story. And, if you didn't grasp its weirdness when it was read a few minutes ago, please pay close attention as I re-read the first part of Acts 2. If you miss the weirdness, you're not listening carefully enough:

“On the day of Pentecost all the Lord’s followers were together in one place. Suddenly there was a noise from heaven like the sound of a mighty wind! It filled the house where they were meeting. Then they saw what looked like fiery tongues moving in all directions, and a tongue [of fire] came and settled on each person there. The Holy Spirit took control of everyone, and they began speaking whatever languages the Spirit let them speak.

“Many religious Jews from every country in the world were living in Jerusalem. And when they heard this noise, a crowd gathered. But they were surprised, because they were hearing everything in their own languages. They were excited and amazed, and said:

“Don’t all these who are speaking come from Galilee? Then why do we hear them speaking our very own languages? Some of us are from Parthia, Media, and Elim. Others are from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, parts of Libya near Cyrene, Rome, Crete, and Arabia. Some of us were born Jews, and others of us have chosen to be Jews. Yet we all hear them using our own languages to tell the wonderful things God has done.’

“Everyone was excited and confused. Some of them even kept asking each other, 'What does all this mean?' Others made fun of the Lord’s followers and said, 'They are drunk.’

“Peter stood with the eleven apostles and spoke in a loud and clear voice to the crowd: 'Friends and everyone else living in Jerusalem, listen carefully to what I have to say! You are wrong to think that these people are drunk. After all, it is only nine o’clock in the morning...’”

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You gotta love a story in which people do such bizarre things someone has to assure others that the people doing the bizarre things are not, in fact, drunk. Because, you know, this happened at 9 AM and apparently *no one* in Jerusalem ever got drunk at 9 AM... //

This is a weird, weird story. And, in order to grasp its meaning with as much fullness possible, a bit of history is required.

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The word “Pentecost” comes from a Greek word that means “the 50th day.” For us Christians, Pentecost falls the 50th day of Easter. (Since Easter fell on April 5th this year, you start with 1 on April 5th, count the days until you get to 50, and voilà! You have arrived at May 24th...Pentecost Sunday of 2015.

While we Christians recognize Pentecost at the 50th day of *Easter*, the story of Pentecost does not have its roots in the story of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. See, at this point in Christian history, Jesus' first disciples were still faithful *Jews*: they still believed and practiced the laws of Judaism.

They also still celebrated Jewish holidays. And what is referred to in Acts chapter 2 as “Pentecost” was actually the Jewish holiday called Shavuot, or the “Feast of Weeks”...which is celebrated the 50th day after the second day of of the Jewish holiday Passover.

On Shavuot, Jews celebrate God giving Moses the law on Mt. Sinai, and, back in biblical times, Jews from all over the place would have made pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate this holiday. This is very important to note if we are to understand what's going on in Acts 2.

So, the disciples were gathered in one place about 10 days after Jesus' ascension into heaven. Then, all of a sudden, a sound like a mighty wind overtook them and the Holy Spirit descended upon them with what looked like tongues of fire resting above the head of each disciple. After that, each disciple started speaking in a language that was *not* his native tongue. Weird...right?

We don't know how long this lasted, or how loud it all was, but it drew the attention of many of the visiting Jews who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot.

None of these visiting Jews really seemed to know what in the world was going on, but those who could hear the disciples could hear them speaking *in their own languages* about God's work through Jesus. And these weren't languages the disciples knew how to speak:

it was a gift of the Holy Spirit that the disciples were able, that day, to *communicate* to those outsiders about God's work through Jesus... and it was a gift of the Holy Spirit that those outsiders were able to *understand* what the disciples were saying.

That is the story of Pentecost.

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Some call Pentecost the “birthday of the Church” because it was the first time the message of Jesus was shared with people who did not live in the areas Jesus himself travelled to. Didn't live there, didn't speak the language.

On the day of Pentecost, the mission Jesus had given the disciples when he ascended began to be realized. Jesus had told them to tell the whole world about him...well, folks from around the world had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot – to celebrate Pentecost – and the Holy Spirit made it possible for them to learn about Jesus Christ on that day.

When he ascended into heaven, Jesus promised the disciples they would be blessed by the Holy Spirit...and they were, indeed, blessed by the Spirit. Not only that, but on that day, their mission officially commenced.

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Pentecost truly *is* a day of celebration in the church. Because it is, in a way, our birthday. But it's also a day of celebration because, each year, Pentecost should inspire us – we should find our hearts “strangely warmed” – with a new sense of vision and mission to share the message and love of Jesus with the world.

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If you pay attention in church circles these days, you might notice a lot of lamenting – and I mean within *the general* church, as in, most churches I'm aware of: the laments are about declining numbers...lack of younger adults...changing community culture...schools and programs that no longer honor Wednesday night as “church night” and no longer honor Sunday mornings as unscheduled time.

The laments are also about individuals and families with changing priorities that keep them away from weekend worship...politics worming their way into public, Christian conversations...certain Christians are too liberal while others are too conservative and the moderates don't seem to stand for anything at all.

Lots of people have lots of ideas why all of these lament-worthy things are happening – and there's usually someone to blame...but that someone never seems to be the one pointing their finger...nor does the blame ever seem to fall with anyone who's part of the blame-giver's own political, cultural, or denominational group.

It seems like it's a tricky time to be part of the church because the church just isn't as much a part of the fabric of our society these days – not like it “used to be,” anyway. And we can lament that all we want, we can cast as much blame as we want...but neither lamenting nor blame-casting is going to draw people to us. I promise you that.

People are not drawn to negativity. Non-church-goers don't look at a bunch of sad, complaining Christians and think, “Hey! I'd like to be part of whatever they're so bummed about!”

After focusing most of this sermon on what happens at the beginning of today's reading from Acts chapter 2,

let me remind you of what we heard at the *end* of the chapter. The end of Acts 2, again, says this:

“All the Lord's followers often met together, and they shared everything they had. They would often sell their property and possessions and give the money to whoever needed it. They broke bread together in different homes and shared their food happily and freely, while praising God. Everyone liked them and each day the Lord added to their group others who were being saved.”

People were drawn to the church when it first began because, among the first Christians, there was a spirit of joy and great generosity. Yes, there was a message of salvation through Jesus...but that salvation inspired joy and generosity. And few things are more inspiring – or more contagious – than joy and generosity.

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That is what the Holy Spirit unleashed on the first Pentecost...*that* is what commenced: fired-up believers with a unified mission of spreading the good news about Jesus Christ, sharing Christ's love with one another, and giving to others where there was need.

“Everyone liked them and each day the Lord added to their group others who were being saved.”

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When we celebrated Ascension Day last week, it was our Graduation Day...but today is Commencement. Today is the day we begin – or begin *again* – our great, big mission to tell the whole world about the love and mercy of Jesus Christ.

So may we truly live this Pentecost mission. By our words and deeds, may the world know of God's great love in Jesus Christ. May the world see in us a salvation marked by joy and generosity. And may we be ever thankful for the Spirit's blessing in the midst of it all.