

FIRST FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT

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The sermon got started as I was driving past Oceana on my way to Red Wing Golf Course on my day off and the fields of wheat around the base were ripe and ready for harvest. I thought what a great way to start off a Pentecost sermon. So I stopped at A.C. Moore the other day and bought this. I wonder if any of you have any idea why for Pentecost I have a vase full of wheat on the altar?

Pentecost was originally a Jewish harvest festival long before it was a Christian celebration. Pentecost occurs 50 days after Passover. We have kept that tradition in the Christian Church by making our Pentecost 50 days after the resurrection. In the Jewish context this was a festival when the first fruits of the spring harvest would be brought to the temple and offered to God. So there you have why those wheat fields called to mind Pentecost for me, but there is more to the symbol of this wheat than just a harvest festival and I will return to that in just a moment.

The Jewish Pentecost celebrates the abundant gifts of God to the people of Israel. This thank offering was a giving back to God a portion of what God had given to them. Very much like our prayer when I accept the gifts of this congregation and we say, "All things come of thee oh Lord and of thine own have we given thee." Israel acknowledges the abundance of care that God gives to them. They remember on Pentecost all of the wonderful things God had done for them.

This also explains all of those people from all of those nations who were gathered in Jerusalem. That long list of names that makes most of our lectors either run for a pronunciation guide or call me for help. People would have celebrated Passover at home. Passover is a family not temple oriented holiday. Passover however required people to travel to the temple in Jerusalem to offer the first fruits. It is into this international milieu that the Spirit bursts in a most unexpected way causing chaos, consternation and joy.

Now the first fruits of the harvest were to be given back to God in ancient Israel and that is not a bad model for us to follow today. Today we tend to give God the leftovers. God however does something totally unexpected that Pentecost day in Jerusalem. On that day the first fruits of the Spirit were given by God to us. Given to a group of worried and confused disciples who had just seen their leader crucified, resurrected and then taken away again as he ascended into heaven.

There they sat in Jerusalem maybe behind locked doors worried about what the future would bring. Jesus had promised them they would not be left alone, but there they were. Surrounded by those who disliked them, this tiny group wondered what in the world can we do. Does this sound familiar?

Last year I showed a video that demonstrated the parallels with today. So many outside our walls that at best ignore us and we worry and wait and wonder. If only we had more members, if only we had more money if only, if only. This past week I found myself getting discouraged as a string of people came in to me to talk about various difficulties, problems and concerns both about their personal lives and concerns about our life as a parish. Then I started working on the sermon and found hope once again. Hope because we have an incredible gift if we will just be willing to risk. That gift is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is stirring us up, making us uncomfortable, challenging the ways we have always done church because maybe, just maybe there is a better way, a way that will reach out to those on the outside in a way that will bring them inside.

On that Pentecost Sunday to a discouraged group of disciples the Spirit bursts in. Not quietly, not with a still small voice, but the sound of a rushing wind. Empowered by the Spirit they spill into the streets and begin speaking in the languages of those who had come to the festival. Yet they were still recognized as Galileans. The others could understand them, but knew that they were from Galilee based on the heavy accents. Think deep south, Mississippi accent. They were not highly respected people, they were hicks from the country yet look at what happened. This unlikely only partially educated group of people added 3000 to their number that day. Now that's church growth! I don't think our newcomer committee could cope with that!

But Mark, they were special they were the disciples some of you may say. Were they really that different than us? The disciples were just average people, but God often works through those who seem the least likely. Maybe they were blessed because they are not too full of themselves or too proud to risk being embarrassed. Maybe it was because they were so desperate that they were willing to listen to the call of the Spirit.

I want to return to my vase of grain here. Stop and think that each of these stalks came from a single seed. Look how much that single seed produced. We have the same potential as each of these seeds, to plant and grow the gospel here in our community. Last year we made this Pentecost banner. Remember how on that morning we added two little hands when we baptized two babies. I do, what a powerful moment that was. Well we could have added 30 more hands to this banner this year. Many of them here because someone here reached out their hand, planted their seed and let it grow.

You see the seeds on this sheaves are just a decoration. I bought them at a craft store. If we leave them in this vase that is all they will ever be, a pretty decoration. Grain is useless if you do not do something with it. Either take it outside and plant it, or grind it into flour and make something. But as it is right here it is not of any use other than to look nice.

Our faith is the same way. If we hold onto it, treasure it and only admire it on Sunday than it really is not of much use to us. Last week at the early service I quoted Fr. Richard Rohr and I would like to return to that quote again for this week especially for the late service who heard Bishop Light preach.

“Living merely for reward or in avoidance of punishment has allowed us to become absentee landlords of our own lives. We just muddle through, safe in the promise of heavenly reward if we do our best. So we go to church on Sunday-we get the reward later and avoid punishment- fire insurance religion instead of any real freedom or love. God is not now, but always later.”¹

The Spirit on Pentecost said the time is now not later. The call is to take our grain out into the world and offer it to the world. As with the parable of the sower some will ignore the gifts, some will embrace them for a time and fade away, but some will take root grow and produce a full stalk of grain.

So take these first fruits of the Spirit and get out there and start planting. The grain doesn't grow if we just leave it here on the altar and admire it. The word isn't spread if it never goes outside that door.

¹ Rohr, Richard On the Threshold of Transformation (Loyola Press Chicago 2010) pg.55