

"When The Church Comes Alive!"

Sermon May 11, 2008

The Reverend Elton O. Smith, Jr.

St. James' Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

You couldn't help but notice it when you came into church this morning with the streamers and the colors: This is really a big day: Pentecost Sunday. It joins Christmas and Easter as the third great feast of the Christian year, it's a day often celebrated as the "birthday of the Church," it's a very appropriate day to welcome new members who come to be baptized this morning, and to top it off—it's Mother's Day! So with all that, it's a lot to celebrate but it may be one of the most confusing of all of our special days. So let's try to put it all together this morning.

What do you think when you hear the words "Pentecostal" and "Holy Spirit" describing your church life?

You may have heard the story of a woman who wandered into an Episcopal church service one morning—somewhere else, not here!—as things were proceeding in proper order: hymns, lessons, prayers. But when the priest went to the pulpit the woman came alive. "Yes!" she blurted out when the preacher made a point she thought was particularly apt. "Praise the Lord, praise his holy name!"—as she got louder and louder. People began to squirm uncomfortably, and an usher finally walked up to her and whispered, "Excuse me, ma'am, but is there something wrong?" "Why no," she said, "I've got the spirit!" At which point the usher replied, "Well, certainly you didn't get it here!"

"Only a fool would pray for the Holy Spirit to come," someone has said. We generally prefer quieter lives. We can calculate our risks and build the patterns around us that keep out the chaos. But the Spirit that founded the church and that stirs in you and me is restlessly creative, pressing us out into new life and new discoveries, seeking to connect—and here is the key word: connect—connect us to what God is trying to do in the whole creation: to draw us and all the vast variety of life in this universe into union with God and each other. When we celebrate that, the Church comes alive!

Maybe we generally prefer quieter lives than that. Maybe we like being part of a quieter church the usher in the story represented. Those of us who years ago were baptized in a small private service may have expected to keep our religion wrapped up that way. That would be like Don Mullins talked about last Sunday: keeping the toy "action figures" of our games back in the 70's, wrapped in their original cellophane so they could be sold decades later on eBay—action figures in name only.

That kind of religion, my friends, has always been just one generation short of extinction. Happily there are more and more Christians of all stripes and denominations

who have come to realize that their religion is not just such a private package. I agree with Pope Benedict who said when he was here in our Washington area just a few days ago, "Any tendency to treat religion as only a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel."

A political commentator on the Post's op-ed page quickly noted this as a demanding and unsettling standard for both the political right and left in the upcoming presidential election, with its stress on love and justice in community, over against radical individualism. As the pope said, "In a society which values personal freedom and autonomy it is easy to lose sight of our dependence on others as well as the responsibilities that we bear toward them...we were created as social beings who find fulfillment only in love...for God and for our neighbor."

Rick Warren in his book "The Purpose Driven Life" and other recognized evangelists of our time are also going beyond old themes of individual salvation to a recognition of how all of our lives are knit together on this fragile earth, our island home.

They say that a picture is worth a thousand words. The scenes of horrible devastation of the earth and people in Burma you've viewed on TV the last few days, witness to a connection with others that in another century might have been ignored.

What all this means is that we are challenged to live out Paul's words to "break down the walls that separate us." The passage we read this morning from the Acts of the Apostles speaks of a new community created across the boundaries of language, nationality, tribe and gender. But despite everything we see and read about the global village and global economy, God knows that the old boundaries are still in us and with us. Whatever the usher said to the lady in the church I just mentioned, we all need to find ways to cross the boundary between an inward, and an outward looking, spirituality.

The Pentecost story doesn't end with the passage we read this morning. It takes us beyond that to show the coming of the Holy Spirit creating a community that demonstrated its faith in compassion and care, in practical service and help, in sacrifice and commitment to others.

Check our bi-weekly newsletter "The Pilgrim" and see how often the public, community and world-oriented face of St. James' is out there inviting you to join in. These are not invitations just to show up to serve at events, and not just to learn something very down to earth about life in our global village. They really are invitations to go beyond just showing up, to go deeper to a change of heart and mind-set to really understand how closely all of us are connected, "with every twitch and grunt" to the lives of others. That's what Pentecost is all about!

Our world is changing before our eyes, but are we open to changing the way we behave with others? The importance of that question becomes sharper when the meaning of Pentecost is linked with the service of Holy Baptism this morning.

It's great that we're doing this, because it's a clear declaration that Baptism is not just a degree of membership, or just a ceremony, or a certificate to file away with our important papers, but it is a license to live in a new world with a new and special gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So my prayers for all of us at this service of baptism will be that on this baptismal day, *we remember who we are*. It is for these babies and for ourselves when we join today in the prayers that our hearts will be open to God's grace and truth, that we will be filled with God's holy and life giving spirit, that we will learn to love others in the power of that Spirit, and that we will be sent into the world in witness to God's love. Those are words from our baptismal prayers this morning. SO, let's remember who we are!

That all connects for me even more as the calendar brings together the gift of the Holy Spirit and Mother's Day. For I'm always reminded on Mother's Day that we need not only to discover a sense of our spiritual and family **roots** but also a lift from spiritual and family **wings**, so that we are freed to rise to the challenges and opportunities that God puts in front of us.

You may wonder: Is there anything new in what I'm saying this morning? Maybe not on the surface, but your life can be different if there is a new pattern, a new model in the way you respond to the new world that—like it or not—it is ours to live in. Your life can be different when Pentecost is discovered to be more than just a church holiday, and that baptisms and Mothers Days are more than just private affairs. These babies and all our families deserve that. In fact, what we all need this morning is really a desire to join in our prayer this Pentecost Sunday:

“Come Holy Spirit, and kindle in us the fire of your love. Take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, take our hearts.... **and set them on fire!**” **AMEN**