

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, MAY 11, 2008
SCRIPTURES: John 7:37-39; Acts 2:1-21
“In the Spirit of the Risen Christ”

(Pentecost Sunday)

So this past Wednesday I found myself in Bridget’s office saying, “OK, the vote on allowing pastors to conduct civil unions in the sanctuary will be counted on Saturday and announced on Sunday, and on Saturday I’m supposed to be at the Conference Annual Meeting all day. And yet I should probably address the vote in my sermon on Sunday, along with some recognition of Mother’s Day and Pentecost and the fact that it’s my last Sunday service before beginning my sabbatical. And it probably wouldn’t hurt to say something about the scripture lesson as well. And all this in a service that will include the Cherub Choir, the Seraph Choir, the Chancel Choir, the Bell Choir AND a baptism! Worried? Heck no, I’m not worried! (I was worried!)

Well friends, let’s start with today’s scripture (It’s always good to start with the Word of God), which is also to recognize Pentecost, and even more. This past Sunday I spoke of the ascension event and how in his last appearance before his disciples Jesus promised them that he would send the Holy Spirit and would empower them to be witnesses in Jerusalem and throughout Judah and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Today we read the story of the actual Pentecost event in which the Spirit of God did come to the disciples and did empower them so that they were able to witness to a great many people who had gathered there in Jerusalem. I’d like to take a moment to look at those people who were gathered on that day to hear the words of the disciples, words spoken in such a way that everyone was able to receive and understand them.

Now most us read through the list of nationalities and ethnic groups there in the second chapter of Acts with little concern beyond the fact that many of the names are hard to pronounce. This past week I stopped to ask self, “Just who were the Parthians and the Medes, the Elamites and the Mesopotamians, the Judeans and the Cappadocians and so on?” With some study I discovered that they were an unbelievable assortment of widely ranging ethnic groups from all over the Roman Empire, which at that time encompassed all of southern Europe, northern Africa, Asia Minor and what we now call the Holy Land.

The second question I asked myself was, “Did these people all get along?” I didn’t know the answer to that point, so I called up our resident history scholar Rob Rodney. Rob did some

research, as did I, and he validated my own conclusion. The First Century A.D. was a time of relative peace in the Roman Empire, but only because Romans were powerful enough to brutally suppress any opposition. The truth is that few if any of the people gathered in Jerusalem that Pentecost day actually liked each other or got along well, but their friction with each other was kept in check by the overshadowing power Rome. In fact if we were to simply bring the groups mentioned in Acts into the present time, the names go something like this: “There were gathered together in Jerusalem Kurds and Iranians, Kuwaitis and Iraqis, Israelis and Palestinians, Turks and Georgians, Macedonians and Egyptians, Libyans and Moroccans, Cretans and Arabs and Italians besides!” (And we all know how well these people get along today!)

The truth is that the people receiving the word of God in Christ Jesus our Lord from those disciples on that Pentecost Day varied incredibly in background, in politics, in religious style and manner, in economic and social status, in philosophy, in education and in ways that we can't even imagine. Yet we are told that on that single day three thousand people received the gospel message in such a way that they chose to be baptized and added to the ranks of believers!

So what does any of that have to do with us? How are we touched by anything that I have just said as we struggle to live out our lives nearly two thousand years after that first Pentecost event? Friends we are still being empowered by the Holy Spirit of God to proclaim the good news to those around us and, whether we realize it or not, we are gifted by the Holy Spirit to offer up to this day the good news of Christ through word and deed in such a way that it can be received by all people. And while we may not often have the opportunity to offer up the Good News today to Elamites or Cappadocians, or even to Kurds or Macedonians, we still proclaim the love God to an unbelievably wide range of backgrounds and beliefs and faith practices and social philosophies and so on. And it is when this congregation tackles difficult issues like same gender civil unions that these wide ranging differences, even within our own fellowship, come to the forefront.

So how do we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ as each of us has come to know and understand it, to each other and to the surrounding community in which we live, and to the world?

Well, the reason that I included the passage from the gospel of John in today's readings was the phrase in which Jesus proclaims, “Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.” which is followed by the comment from the gospel writer, “Now he said this about the

Spirit, which believers in him were yet to receive.” (NRSV translation) Again I did a little study of that short statement and found what I believe to be a slight inaccuracy in the translation. When Jesus speaks of rivers of living water flowing forth, the place where it flows from is, in the original Greek, “Koilia” which translated literally is not “heart” (heart would be “Kardia” in the Greek). No, Koilia accurately translated would be “colon” or “gut”. The power of the Spirit doesn’t come from the heart, it comes from the gut, where the Greeks believed the emotions were centered and where passion was centered. Friends, in the issue of the vote taken over the past two weeks and in all difficult issues, we must continue to speak to each other, and we must speak from the gut, from our emotional centers. And we must listen to each other’s emotions as well. And we must know that when we do engage each other in conversation around difficult topics, around those topics that can make our guts roil, the Holy Spirit of God has the power to be present and to speak through us and to speak to us and to empower us with gifts that will enable the true message of the Gospel to shine through.

I have to tell you, friends, my gut has been roiling In recent times here at First Church, and I know that many others here been struggling mightily with their emotions over vote as well. It is my sincere hope that while this vote on performing of civil unions in the church may become an incentive toward new conversations and new initiatives and new explorations within this fellowship, it will not be the end of anything or for anyone. For those who are disappointed with the outcome of the vote, this should not be the end of your participation in the life of this church, nor in your continued engagement with and wrestling over this and other difficult issues. For those who are elated with the outcome of the vote, this is most surely not the time to put off or ignore those with whom you disagree simply because you find yourselves in a commanding majority. And all us should be continually striving bring into the conversation the many who cast no vote at all, especially those who have consciously chosen not to vote or even engage in the conversation and in the issue.

I want to note at this point that there is one other common and appropriate English translation of the Greek word “koilia”. It is the English word “womb”. (And this is my only passing reference to Mother’s Day, so listen carefully because it will go by quickly!) When Mary the mother of Jesus went to see her kinswoman Elizabeth (who was pregnant), the moment that Elizabeth saw Mary we are told that the child leapt in her “koilia”; in her womb. Those rivers of living water that Jesus offered up as a cryptic utterance of the Holy Spirit of God could

also be said to issue forth from the womb of the believer!

Friends, the Church of Jesus Christ continues to this day as an incredibly diverse collection of individuals just as it began as an incredibly diverse collection of individuals. We are not ever going to think the same or feel the same or live the same or communicate the same. If we continue though to witness to each other and to the community of Granby and to world the Good News of the love of God in Christ Jesus our Savior; if we continue to engage in those gut wrenching struggles that will ever be before us, and yet do so in the love which Christ so beautifully championed and demonstrated, then there will come forth from the womb of this fellowship a continuous birth of the Holy Spirit that will flow forth like rivers of living water. And, just as on that first Pentecost Day, all people who are touched by this congregation will hear and know the Good news of salvation in Jesus Christ in such a way that they will be able to understand it and be transformed by it.

It is my prayer that God will grant each of us and all us together in the days and weeks and months to come the Pentecostal power of the Holy Spirit, that we may be a true and dedicated fellowship of faith that Christ has called us to be and that we purpose to be. Amen.