

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Senior Pastor

Sunday, May 27, 2007

Sermon Text: Acts 2:1-21

We're going to try something unusual today before my prayer and before my sermon. I need to pass out some things. We've already spoken with the children about the symbolism of fire for today, and that symbolism is always signified by something red. Today it shall be red yarn. I didn't check out this idea with the trustees because it is a trip hazard if we don't do it all. Here's the choir's. Now, this will be done during the sermon later on, but not right off the bat because I'm afraid I'll lose your attention. I hope we can multitask. I hope we can pass this back and forth and up and down so everybody has a piece of it for the final prayer at the end of the sermon and also make sure that nobody will leave early. They'll be stuck where they are. Here's the amen corner. It's marked amen corner. This goes to the balcony. Can I get you to run that to the balcony? Any excuse to run in church is good.

I want to talk about Pentecost along the lines of – we didn't practice this, right side, that's my right so that's yours. No. I don't know that it makes any difference. I had an engineer figure this out. You know how engineers are. Very precise. This is for the left side. Okay. Now, not to be handed out yet. We're divided up in so many ways.

One year when I was talking about Pentecost and the color red, about the flame and the presence of God with us, one child brought up he thought red meant Gamecocks. Now, I will tell you how divided we get in this world. My grandson, Eli, is only, he's not even two years old, but his father, who graduated from Clemson, has taught if anybody ever says Gamecocks, he says, “Eeeeww!” I mean he'll do it. When you see Eli, if he's here, just say Gamecock, and you will see that he's already been taught. We're taught to divide ourselves in so many ways. I think Pentecost is really not so much about flame, not so much about tongues, but about hearing the uniting word and being united by the power and by the purpose and by the presence of God through the Holy Spirit. Let us pray.

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now, the title of my sermon is not a misprint. It is “Untied Methodists.” Some years ago, we had our national general conference of the UMC in Indianapolis, and a fellow pastor, who went to that, reported that on the marquee of one of the major hotels it said in bold letters for all the world to see, “Welcome Untied Methodists.” People get that wrong very often. We are more often untied than united as a denomination, and truth be told, even here at Main Street, Greenwood. It is better to be united.

I went on an academic tour of Europe my senior year at Wofford College, and I learned many things. One of the things I learned was that traffic stops for nothing in Rome. Nothing! The tour guide impressed that upon us and the importance of staying together. Some of our group wanted to just cross a four-lane highway and get to the bus after we

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had seen some ruins, and she said, “No, no, no, no!” She screamed. She said, “If you cross one by one, they will hit you one by one, but if you cross together, they think the group will do damage to their car and so they will stop for you.” Now, I’m not sure exactly what that teaches us except it’s better to stay together.

Now, next week at our annual conference in Florence, not Italy, but South Carolina, we will pass many resolutions. You know, things don’t really get better because we pass resolutions saying things will get better. Congregations do not grow because the Board of Stewards declares it so and has it recorded in the official minutes. Building projects do not get paid for or even agreed upon just because we want them to. In the church, God’s church, things get better when we unite around God, and seek God’s will for this time and this place, and seek the power and the courage to do it. All of these things begin and end with God, not us, and not even the finest resolution or the cleverest sermon can make it happen. If God does not come first in our faith and in our plans and in our lives then we often come in last under the category of unity. If you think about it, of course, that has to be true. If we, each of us individually, is seeking our own disparate will then where does unity even have a chance?

You can have, as in some smaller churches I have known, a sort of unity when everyone buckles to the loudest and the stubbornest ego among us. That can happen. What happens in churches like that is they eventually die a horrible death because they can only grow as far as ego allows. God’s church grows better, and God’s people remain more united when we remember from time to time that we belong, all of us, to God. The God we know best and the person and personality and the teachings of Jesus Christ. Loving, forgiving, compassionate, humble and serving.

Pentecost speaks of the early church empowered not by a fierce determined group, but by quite ordinary humans, even sub-par men, who trusted God to give them power and words and guidance. Too often we find ourselves speaking of God, but not seeking God. Praying to God, but not listening to what God has already said in Jesus Christ. We find ourselves planning for God on paper, but not with any end goal in mind. Remember Jesus gave us several end goals. The goal of passing on His Spirit, which gives us the peace, that passes all human understanding. Loving God and loving neighbor and even loving enemies. Finally, the goal of making disciples, who believe and do the same. These are still very good goals. If we have other goals that involve our feelings or our desires or our egos more than love and harmony with God and neighbor, then we will remain more untied than united Methodists.

It’s Pentecost. Where is our power? Where it has always been. From God! United and seeking to serve God together, that is where our power comes from. Unless and until we do that, more and more perfectly, we and many of our brother and sister churches will just limp along as untied Methodists, each seeking his or her own way, and forgetting the promise of unity, of power and peace and purpose that God gave at Pentecost.

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What is Pentecost anyway? Some of us have looked it up in footnote and then we forgot about it. I'll try not to go on to Bible study time too long. I know that, as the young children have already told me, preachers say a lot of things that are boring. But briefly, in the ancient Jewish calendar, there was nothing more important than Passover. You know the sparing of death and the freedom from slavery and bondage in Egypt, and 50 days after that, 50 days after Passover came Pentecost, the day of thanksgiving for the first fruits of the harvest. It's like a Jewish harvest day, and it always came 50 days after Passover. Pentecost is not a brand new Christian holiday. It is an ancient Jewish holiday that something specifically Christian happened on that day. Now beyond the harvest celebration, they always read one passage from Deuteronomy 26:3, "Today I declare to the Lord God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us. I have come into that land." I'm going to explain. It's the spiritual parallel with Jesus' crucifixion and what happened that first Pentecost. Jesus of whom John the Baptist said, "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." That happened at Passover, and then 50 days later at Pentecost, believers were touched by the Spirit of God as an indication of the great harvest that had begun. Harvest of life everlasting and new life that Jesus had won.

So the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost and the church was empowered, and in a way born that day, the same day the worshipers were saying, today I declare to the Lord God that I come into the land that the Lord has promised to us. It was a new land. It was the first of a new harvest. You and I are among that harvest, and the land is spiritual territory. It is a new land, a new reality, a new creation. The Promised Land is not a place. It is a relationship embraced by God. Remember, these disciples were told to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came upon them. Emphatically, Jesus ordered them to stay until you get the power of the Spirit. Don't even try to start this ministry unless and until you have received this power and guidance of the Spirit. So they waited. They waited until this Jewish festival of Pentecost, and something did happen. Something did happen. They got power. They got guidance. They got comfort. They got courage.

From the beginning, from the beginning of Genesis, God desires to be in relationship with us. We were made to be in relationship with God. We were made to be in relationship with one another. From the beginning also, we are rejecting God's overtures of relationship and covenant, and so here we have in Pentecost, God taking the action, and God coming to us in Christ, and coming to us in the Spirit to make a new relationship, a new reality, a new outreach through the church that Jesus founded and left, to spread that reality and to spread that open-arm embrace to the entire world. God still seeks us, all of us.

The main message is this. God sent power at Pentecost to unify these people who were afraid and had no guidance and no purpose, and made them into spiritual giants. The flames also are a spiritual sign that we keep on the brick wall of our new building and on our hymnals and all of our other publications. A sign that God's spirit is with us today just as powerfully as God was with us in the physical person of Jesus Christ. Fire, fire is

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a symbol. Fire on these altar candles is a symbol that God is present. Fire has a way of burning away the chaff and anything that is useless and cumbersome. Fire refines. Fire galvanizes and makes strong. It purifies. The hearts of the disciples were set on fire with passion, with love for Christ, and with a burning desire to share the Gospel story.

Our mission is to tell and to live a cross-centered Gospel, empowered and taught by the Holy Spirit. Our founder, John Wesley, said this. He said, “The renewal of the soul after the image of God,” that means to grow closer and to be more like Jesus, “can never be wrought except by the power of God’s Holy Spirit.” Accept not just God with us, but God in us is what I believe he means to say.

Remember, if we are, as a church, aiming for anything that we alone can do without God’s help then we are aiming too low. We should be aiming for things we should do only with God’s help, and understand that we are agents and hands for God’s Spirit and guidance. We’re called to do something that is only possible with God’s help, but God’s help is here. God’s Spirit is here to unite us and to empower us and to lead us, and that is the message of Pentecost. God with us through the Spirit. God with us just as powerfully as ever Jesus was here in the flesh, teaching, continuing to teach what Jesus taught, but now not just reverently reading the parables and the teachings of Jesus, but actually empowered to live the way that Jesus lived and to follow the teachings that Jesus taught. Not agreeing that it’s a good idea, but being enabled to actually grow into doing those good ideas that Jesus taught.

I want the renewal of my soul. I know you want the renewal of your soul and of this church and of Greenwood as a community. We would love to be more of a community as a church and as a city than just people who get their mail at similar zip codes. We would love to be together united, and Pentecost promises that God wants the same.

Yesterday, I rode from Laurens on my bicycle. Now that I’m turning 50, and I’m trying to outrun my genetics, and I’m trying to keep my blood pressure down, and trying to keep my heart rate down, and my cholesterol down. Seems like everything has to be down. I’ve been riding my bicycle pretty seriously for a month, and yesterday I rode from Laurens to my mother-in-law’s house in Woodruff. I want to tell you that’s 22 miles, and we averaged 17.2 miles an hour. Not that I’m bragging, but we did. It wasn’t that hard because I rode behind this huge guy, former player on the Clemson University ACC Championship and Citrus Bowl Championship team from 1988, Ty Granger, who was actually drafted for the Buccaneers. He’s a big guy still. He rode ahead, and I watch just enough NASCAR to know that if you get about six inches behind a big guy, who’s cutting through the wind, it’s not that hard! It’s not that hard! The other guy, smaller than me, rode behind me. There were three of us in a row. He cut through the wind, and I pedaled behind him, and another guy pedaled behind me, and together we had the biggest, the strongest guy out front cutting the resistance so it’s not that hard to follow. Unity can make more happen, and we can travel further in a lifetime with less friction when we put God out front and follow and pedal for all we’re worth!

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Put God out front in your prayers, in your problems and in your plans. Pray to God seriously, believing that God desires and has the power to work things together for the good. Pray to God about our debt, also write a check, but pray to God about our debt. Pray to God for our music program and our youth program as we seek new leadership. It is so easy to slip into the weekly routine of Sunday sermon and Sunday school and not much else. We need to be more united self-consciously, and understand that we are formed, and we are empowered, and we are founded from the beginning by God’s Spirit among us.

I want to share a poem, and as I share this poem I want you to please try to do two things at once. Start passing this way then that way then this way then that way, and we’ll connect every section. You can watch the choir. They’ll illustrate it for you. Everybody have a piece of the red thread. I hope at the end when we have a prayer in just a minute or two that . . . Don’t look at the choir! Just everybody get some of that yarn, and we’re going to have a prayer at the end united symbolically by the red cord and by the flame of God’s Spirit among us.

Hear this if you can. Shh! It’s a poem by that famous author, anonymous. I don’t know who wrote it. “I got up early one morning and rushed right into the day. I had so much to accomplish that I didn’t take time to pray. Problems just tumbled about me and heavier became each task. Why doesn’t God help me I wondered? He answered, you didn’t ask. I wanted to see joy and beauty, but the day toiled on gray and bleak. I wondered why God didn’t show me. He said, but you didn’t seek. I tried to come into God’s presence. I used all my keys at the lock. God gently and lovingly chided, my child, you didn’t knock. I woke up early this morning and paused before entering the day. I had so much to accomplish that I had to take time to pray.”

Too many people are trying to go it alone. Too many churches are trying to go it alone. They act as though the only thing that can occur in a prayer is what psychologically happens inside the individual head when you pray. What about the whole church? Jesus prayed for the whole church. Let us pray for the whole church and for this church believing that God still has power to unite and to make strong and whole, and dare I say it, holy. Holy means set apart for God’s use. We need to pray in order for God to order our lives.

A former president wrote the following. He wrote it about our nation, and I want you to try to hear it for the nation and for the church. He wrote, “We have been the recipients of the greatest blessings of Heaven. We have been preserved in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has ever grown, but we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand, which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined in the deceitfulness of our hearts that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated and unbroken success, we have become too

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self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace. Too proud to pray to God who made us. We should be moved then to humble ourselves before God, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.” Some of you will recognize those words were written April 30, 1863 by Abraham Lincoln in the middle of the Civil War proclaiming a day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer.

Yes, nations, individuals, and churches all stand in the need of prayer. Prayer for guidance, prayer for deliverance, prayer believing that God can shape us into people of integrity and discipline, that God can grow us closer to the mind and the image and the person and the personality of Jesus Christ, prayer to God to forgive us of our sins and prayer for the spiritual power to become united under the teachings and the example of Jesus Christ. Pentecost calls us to remember that we can do more when we put God out front and follow, follow pedaling as fast as we can. Amen.

Now, we did have one extra row for the balcony, but only a few people are in the balcony. Is everyone connected with a red cord? As connected as we can be. It is still going? I see it. We’re on the radio, so I can’t have any dead time. We’re almost at the end of our time, but I do hope that the symbolism, even if it is incomplete, is still of some value.

Let us bow our heads together. You can bow your heads and keep your eyes open and pass the cord. Let us as united as we can be, maybe only partially united is still a more beautiful symbol and a more accurate one. Let us pray.

Holy Father, we do thank you for your promise from beginning to end in the Scripture that you do desire a relationship with us; that you have been a light in the darkness and a burning bush for Moses and a pillar of fire for the children of Israel across the desert; and also a light that has come into the world in Jesus Christ, and the world couldn’t understand it, and the world couldn’t put it out though it tried. Lord, your light has come into our lives, into our homes, into our heads, and into our hearts. Your light and your spirit urging us to grow. Give us a fire and give us a passion to follow your son, not as a name, but as a man, as one who taught us and one who lived your will most perfectly on the face of this earth. Lord, when we fall short, we also need to be reminded that you do forgive and are a God of grace and mercy. Give us courage to try, and when we fail, courage to try again. In Jesus’ name and by the power of your Holy Spirit, unite us under Christ, as we are bold to continue His ministry in this town, in this place, in this time, in the ways that we can with the talents and treasures that we have. Lord, bless our feeble efforts. We give you the credit. We know you are the power. Amen.