

Portraits of Pentecost

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Ephesians 4:17-32

It's Pentecost. On Pentecost we wear red stoles and we think of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. There are multiple ways in which the Bible portrays the work of the Spirit, so as a preacher there are different ways you can go in your sermon.

For instance: You can paint a grand landscape. I'm thinking of one of those grand western landscapes of the American west painted in the 19th century. Can you picture what I'm talking about? They were painted by people like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran. Even if you aren't an art historian and even if you haven't heard those names, you've probably seen their work: sprawling canvases showing enormous western vistas. The sun setting over Yosemite Valley. The purple mountains. The crimson sky. A waterfall throwing up steam. Two men on horseback small in the foreground looking westward. Romantic images of the American west. Big skies and wide horizons.

So, we could look at Pentecost and the work of the Spirit in that big-picture way. We could tell the story as it happened in Acts 2. The Spirit coming in a rush of wind! Tongues of flame appearing on the heads of the disciples! People from all nations under heaven hearing the gospel! 3000 people coming to Christ! The gospel goes out from Jerusalem to Samaria to the end of the earth. Sons and daughters prophesying. Young men seeing visions. Old men dreaming dreams.

Actually, for the first three chapters of Ephesians, that's more or less the perspective Paul has been taking. At the beginning of Ephesians, Paul is the Thomas Moran of theology. He paints a grand landscape. He has been putting us on a mountain top so we can see the wide horizons of God's work and the grand sweep of the Spirit's movement. Paul's rhetoric soars: Christ gathering all things on heaven and earth to himself. "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power, through his Spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith, and I pray that you, being rooted and established in love may have power together with all God's holy people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ!" It's a beautiful picture of the great sweep of salvation.

But the grand landscape isn't the only way to approach Pentecost. You could paint a sprawling landscape of the Spirit's work, you could paint a Thomas Moran, but you could also paint a Vermeer. Many of you know the work of Johannes Vermeer, the 17th century Dutch painter. He didn't paint grand landscapes; he painted small domestic scenes. A milkmaid pouring milk into a basin in the kitchen. A woman working on her lacework in the living room. A man giving a music lesson in the parlor. We could reflect on the Spirit's work by using a smaller frame and a smaller canvas. And that's where our passage is taking us today.

At the beginning of Ephesians Paul is on the mountaintop proclaiming the big picture, but in our passage, Paul has come down from the mountain and he's sitting at the kitchen table. In our passage, Paul is painting pictures of how the Spirit works in the small ordinary places of our life. Paul brings us to these ordinary places, and he shows us that when the Holy Spirit fills you and when Christ lives in you, you are changed. Something deep and rich and beautiful takes root in you, and you become a different kind of person.

Paul contrasts the new life of the Holy Spirit with an old life that has a very different spirit. Before he gets to painting these small portraits of life in the Holy Spirit, he paints a picture of this other spirit, which is the dominant spirit of the Ephesian culture. What sort of picture does Paul paint? In my mind, it's a portrait of a person all by himself in a dark room with a look in his eyes that's a mixture of hunger and boredom. It's a picture of a person turned inward on themselves, a person who is driven by their desires and their impulses. In Paul's words, it's one of the people who have, "lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to sensuality". People whose spirits are numb, who go through life lurching after random pleasures, trying to wake up their souls.

This is Paul's description of the dominant culture of his day and it's surprisingly familiar. It's the spirit that drives pleasure seeking partiers. It's the spirit that lives in the bored middle-aged man sitting in front of his TV, nursing his 3rd drink of the night. Sometimes he watches the game; sometimes he looks at porn on his phone. It's 2000 years after Paul, but his description is familiar.

But now, having briefly painted this depressing picture of the culture's spirit, Paul turns towards painting portraits of an entirely different kind of life: Small portraits of life in Christ; intimate portraits of life led by the Spirit. I'm not going to look at all of Paul's small portraits, but I am going to focus on three of them so that maybe, on this Pentecost Sunday, we can get a sense of the Spirit moving and changing us in the small places of our lives.

"Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for you are all members of one body." What's in this little picture? Here's the small portrait I see in Paul's words: Two women, friends, sitting in a coffee shop talking about life. One of them has reached out to grab her friend's hand and give it a squeeze.

That might be a strange picture to put with these words. I mean, isn't this a word about lying? Isn't Paul telling us do not lie? And that's true, of course. But Paul is doing more than telling us not to lie; he's calling us to positive, authentic speech to one another. "You are all members of one body," he says. This is about community building conversation. Paul amplifies this point later in our passage when he says, "Do not let unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up." This is more than "Don't lie!"; this is about the Spirit working through life-giving conversation.

It reminds me of an insight I learned from Christian Wiman. Something I read in his book, *My Bright Abyss*. It's an insight about sharing things in our hearts. Wiman noticed that if we do not share our joys, if we do not speak our joys truthfully and openly to others, they will wither. Conversely, if we don't share our sorrows with others, those sorrows grow. Unshared sorrows get heavier and heavier in our heart. Here's what he says, "Christ comes alive [the spirit moves] in communion between people. I am pretty certain that without shared social devotion, [without intentionally sharing the contents of our soul in some kind of community] one's solitary experiences of God wither into a form of withholding, spiritual stinginess; the light of Christ growing ever fainter in the glooms of the self."

Wiman recognizes a spiritual truth: When we share our sorrows, they shrink. But when we share our joys, they grow. Here is the phenomenon in miniature: when you share a sorrow with someone (my wife and I had a miscarriage last week) it is as if a small portion of that pain is taken out of you and carried by the other person. Your darkness grows smaller, and somehow, when it is carried between you, the overall balance of the sadness is diminished. But if you share a joy with someone, (we're pregnant again! We're going to have a baby!) your joy isn't diminished. In fact, when you share a joy with another person your joy increases, because you get to see their excitement at your news. So, they get joy and you get more joy and the overall balance increases.

Here's what Wiman goes on to say. "Even if you are socially shy and generally inarticulate about spiritual matters," and he definitely puts himself in that introverted category, "you must not swerve from the engagements God offers you." By which he doesn't mean, and Paul doesn't mean: Introverts have to become faith extroverts, getting up on stage and announcing every spiritual feeling they've ever had. It does mean that even introverts have to express these feelings even if it's only to one trusted friend. It's what Paul is saying elsewhere when he says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." (Romans 12:15)

What I'm describing to you here is not some sort of therapeutic device; it is a minute description of how and where the Spirit flows, how we open ourselves to the Spirit's power. Sitting with your Christian friend this week, sharing with them a joy or a sorrow over a cup of coffee; you may not hear wind or see fire, but the Spirit will be working there.

Let us look at another small portrait of the Spirit's work: "In your anger, do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." The small portrait I see Paul painting with these words: A young man crouched over his college math exam.

Let me explain: In this passage, Paul is saying that you shouldn't hold onto your anger until it ferments into bitterness. Deal with your anger right away. And though Paul doesn't mention the word here (though he mentions it later in verse 32), the tool for dealing with anger is forgiveness. When you let anger become bitterness and malice, the Spirit is grieved. When you meet anger with forgiveness, the Spirit moves.

Here's a story I heard from David Smith, an education prof at Calvin. It's a story about something that happened to math professor Jim Bradley, whom I don't know, but maybe some of you do. Professor Bradley was teaching a 100 level Stats class – a class filled with people who weren't majors but were taking the course to fulfill core requirements. After the first session of this class a sheepish youth came up to him and asked him, begged him, if there was any way he could get out of the class. He wanted to be relieved of his Calvin math requirement, and he was talking to everyone to make that happen. He had talked to his advisor already, and now he was talking to his prof. "Why do you want to get out of this class?" asked professor Bradley? "I'm no good at Math," said the student with some embarrassment. "How do you know you're no good?" "Trust me, I've taken lots of math courses and I'm not good at math" "Bradley said, "Tell you what, I have a test in my office, it's designed to test math aptitude, come and take that a second and then we'll talk."

The student went to his office, took the test and did terrible. He could add and subtract numbers, but that's about it. After he got the results, Bradley said to the student. "So how did you ever make it through High School math?" The student said, "I just crammed before every test and memorized everything and then forgot it all as soon as the test was done." "And when did you decide you were no good at Math?" The student thought for a moment and said, "When I was in first grade, after a math test, the teacher held up my paper in front of the class as an example of how not to do it...at that moment I decided I was no good at Math." Bradley said to the student. "Well, you have to take the class, and I'll get you a tutor to help you, but if you want to pass this class, the first thing you need to do is to forgive your first-grade teacher." The young man said he'd think about it.

A little while later Professor Bradley ran into this student: "Have you forgiven your teacher yet?" he asked. The young man was evasive and admitted that he hadn't. "You need to do that" Bradley said again. Finally, the student did forgive his teacher – I can't remember if he sent a letter or what he did, but he forgave. After the sun had set on his anger a thousand times, in a real and intentional way, he forgave. He continued in the class and on his first test, he got a 66 percent. Not a great grade, but he passed. On his second test he got in the 80's (I think it was) – very solid. And on his third test he got 95%, which was the highest grade in the class.

Pentecost in a stats class. The Spirit was moving. The Spirit working through a teacher and through forgiveness, to change a young man's sense of himself. No wind, no fire, no miracle of tongues, but a small, intimate portrait of Pentecost all the same.

One more portrait. "Be kind and compassionate to one another." Says Paul. The small portrait seen here is the Grand Rapids Christian Middle School choir, circa 2012 or so. Back then I still had middle schoolers and so, I went to the choir concerts. I remember that the children that year did a good job singing. But what really stuck out to me is something that happened during the 6th grade choir. There was a boy in the choir who was very obviously not neuro typical. He was really struggling with the lights of the stage, and the people watching him and the singing all around him. He was agitated. He waved his hands, he shook his head, he covered his face, he covered his ears, a couple of times he stepped down off of his riser into the row in front of him.

Now I thought back to how middle schoolers in my day would have reacted to this display. I hate to say it, but I think the reaction would have been to move away: "Oh my goodness, you're acting so weird!" And it might even have been a smirking laughter, "Look at this guy! What's wrong with him?"

But what I saw on that stage was neither of those things. The kids all around him kept singing, and in the midst of the songs, as best they could, they put a hand on his back and reassured him, they spoke calming words. They helped him back to his place. They were gentle and patient. "Be kind and compassionate with one another" That they were in every way.

For me, that scene was better than any song sung by any of the choirs that night. It was a kind of hymn of praise to the power of the Holy Spirit. The wind was blowing and the fire was burning, and we could all see it.

The Spirit moves everywhere: It blows in the great movements of history, moving the world towards the New Creation. It also blows at kitchen tables and coffee shops and in quiet conversations. And in those small places when you and I offer ourselves up to his work, it is beautiful. ©Rev. Peter Jonker