

**Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC**  
June 4, 2017  
Pentecost

**“The House on Fire:  
The Surge for High Adventure”**

“... Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared on them,  
and a tongue rested on each of them ...”

And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.”  
Acts 2:3, 19

**PRELUDE**

There is a good sound,  
a “sweet, sweet spirit”  
in this place this morning.  
Pentecost always seems  
to come at the right time –  
to pick us up,  
to enliven and renew our spirits.

How good and pleasant it is when  
worship is filled with the sound of  
brass and woodwind,  
percussion and string,  
stirring our hearts,  
and moving our hands,  
such that we become participants  
in praise.

Pentecost always seems to come  
at the right time.  
It changes mind and mood,  
it lifts up our hearts,  
and if we let it, it can  
alter the course  
of our lives.

It signals the dawn of  
a new age, as momentous  
as any birthday.

Pentecost always seems to come  
at the right time,  
when desperately needed:  
to mend what is broken and  
move what is dead,  
to disclose latent possibility.

Remember the words of the old hymn:

**“Sometimes I feel discouraged, and  
think my work’s in vain,  
but then the Holy Spirit revives  
my soul again”**  
 (“There is a Balm in Gilead,” No. 553, NCH).

Pentecost always seems to come  
at the right time,  
not to make us feel good  
(which it does as a  
pleasurable side effect),  
but to adjust and align us with a goodness  
that comes when connected to Jesus,  
which is a beautiful and wonderful thing  
to behold.

Pentecost always seems to come  
at the right time,  
to complete the circuit that Jesus promised,  
to keep current the Way, the Life, and  
the Truth Jesus advanced.

Pentecost always seem to come  
at the right time;  
it is promised;  
but it is not programmable.

There is no iTunes app for the mobile device  
that can be downloaded and played  
as we determine.

It is a gift that we are invited to discover,  
to love, to cherish.

Our gathering today is  
Pentecost observance  
dictated by calendar.

The question I find compelling -  
will our observance become  
participation?

Will we be receptive to the gift,  
to the wind, to the fire, that God is  
always eager for us to display  
(see Numbers 11:29)?

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Pentecost - it's a Greek term meaning "fifty,"  
describing a Jewish festival, the Festival of Weeks.  
Following Passover, count seven weeks, then party -  
celebrate. Pause, reflect, praise the Lord for a day off -  
and the gift of the law received from Moses.  
Celebrants are advised: make an offering **by fire**  
**"of pleasing odor to the Lord."**

You can read about the "big three" festivals,  
the "**holy convocations**" mandated in the  
23rd chapter of Leviticus. Pentecost,  
the Festival of Weeks, intersects Passover Festival,  
and the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:26) and the  
Festival of Booths (Succoth; Leviticus 23:34).  
These were holy days set apart to define  
religious obligation, to socialize spirituality.

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This morning I want to offer just a couple of thoughts that I hope will enlarge our understanding of Pentecost and its significance as a Christian festival day.

First, Pentecost magnifies the role played in our lives by the Holy Spirit.

In the Book of Acts, the first followers were said to have been “**about 120**” people in number (Acts 1:15). Jesus had instructed them to stay in Jerusalem, to wait for the Spirit he promised would come to them.

The waiting had to have been hard, for while they were promised the Spirit would come, they were also instructed that its predictability was not within their power.

So they waited. And waited.  
Until “**suddenly,**”  
the wind, the flame, the fire,  
the doors thrust open, and the church  
hit the streets.

And what a surprise:  
a revival of Galileans in Jerusalem.  
Such an unexpected people  
linking with a vast multinational crowd.

What a surprise: God working within and through our community at Pentecost; divinity was not detached, some outside “force” looking in, but an inside resident working out.

I feel strongly that we understand and draw this distinction. Linda Woodhead, in her work, *Christianity - a Brief Insight*, has spoken of Christian origins as “**an explosion of spiritual energy - harnessed, focused, and channeled by Jesus ...**”

(see p. viii). This explosion gave rise to what she calls “**many different Christianities**” – a large spectrum and range of “**Christian possibility.**”

We aren't very accepting of wide-ranging  
Christian possibilities.

I recall my last visit to the Gladstone Library in Wales, browsing in the book stalls, and coming upon a reference work on heretical thought (thought “at variance” with widely accepted norms). The reference book was thick. In the beginning there was lots of variation. It's all because of the sneaky work of the Holy Spirit, what Woodhead calls the “**rogue element**” in Christianity, “**the sacred in a form that is hardest for churches to pin down and control**” (Woodhead, *Christianity*, p. 47).

This is what was so startling – so delightfully scandalous, through the Holy Spirit, the love of Jesus is available to anybody – to everybody. The great Equalizer!

Suddenly the wind, suddenly the fire,  
suddenly within, God in residence,  
working out –  
of man, of woman,  
of Jew, and Greek,  
of child, the least of these;  
of the refugee, the immigrant, the Asian,  
the Indian, wherever the human heart  
might melt and provide welcome  
for goodness and mercy.

This is one of the great joys,  
of the ancient wisdom –  
amazing grace abounds,  
and we all get to sing,  
we all have a place at the Table.

It brings to mind the Maya Angelou  
poem, Human Family:

*I note the obvious differences  
in the human family.  
Some of us are serious,  
some thrive on comedy.*

*The variety of our skin tones,  
can confuse, bemuse, delight,  
brown and pink and beige and purple,  
tan and blue and white.*

*I've sailed upon the seven seas  
and stopped in every land,  
I've seen the wonders of the world  
not yet one common man.*

*I know ten thousand women  
called Jane and Mary Jane,  
but I've not seen any two  
who really were the same.*

*Mirror twins are different  
although their features jibe,  
and lovers think quite different thoughts  
while lying side by side.*

*We are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unlike.  
We are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unlike.*

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Pentecost celebrates the Holy Spirit,  
working in conjunction with a willing  
and waiting humanity. And the spirit  
comes, not to overwhelm or to coerce

submission/to require surrender; but to  
elicit our consent; **to stir our cooperation;**  
to empower and encourage us.

Encourage - such an important word for Christians.  
To embolden, to buoy, to prop us up when faced  
with adversity.

I sometimes think that is what actually  
happened on the day of Pentecost.

Somebody got up and said,  
“Friends, this is the day the Lord has made,  
I think we best get on with it.  
Indeed, I think our time has come  
to live in the promise.”

Such encouragement was contagious.  
There was an act of spontaneous combustion.  
Indeed, they all hit the streets  
to demonstrate God’s love.  
And it began with a spark of courage  
to advance the future God intends.

Speaking in another time and place,  
Benjamin Disraeli drew a distinction  
between smoke and fire.  
**“Courage is fire, bully is smoke.”**

Our world today -  
filled with too much smoke,  
not enough fire.  
Too much smoke,  
not enough fire  
in the church, in Washington,  
and not enough fire.

How disappointing this week -  
the news that we, as a nation, will work  
to withdraw from the Paris Agreement,

an effort coordinated by the United Nations to address climate change.

The greatest moral challenge the world has ever faced – and our President signaled retreat, an act David Gergen labeled “grotesquely irresponsible.”

Is there not a better time for the church to discover Pentecostal fire, to demonstrate: this is the day the Lord has made, let us get on with the work of extending God’s love? Is there not a better time for the church to translate God’s love into earthwise action?

We can all be so engaged.  
Pentecost reminds us there is a tongue of fire for each of us.

Our UCC leaders wrote this week:  
**“In the streets, at the Statehouse, with our phones and email, by committing our time, financial resources and prayers – it is up to us – we the people – to bend the moral arc of justice. And we will.”**

Yes, we will – when we discover the promise and possibilities of Pentecost, when we translate God’s love for the world to the world.

Let us not underestimate what role we can play. One of the big shockers in our scripture is not so much the fire – but the people who were ablaze.

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### **Pentecost – God’s Resolve that the Church Flourish**

It was a little over a century ago, a Wellesley

College professor by the name of Vida Scudder, wrote  
**“The time will come when the Christian faith will  
have to fight for right of way among crowding  
antagonists ... And in thoughts like these all  
genuine Christians must rejoice. Without the  
call to high adventure, the church has never flourished”**  
(*A People’s History of the Christianity*, p. 24, Diana Butler Bass).

I wonder if Vida Scudder had in mind a day such  
as our own, a day filled with lots of smoke,  
but not enough fire ... a day when genuine Christians  
have the possibility to advance, with rejoicing.

The church is blessed that flourishes  
with a call to high adventure.  
Our high adventure is to keep the  
vision and spirit of Pentecost alive,  
to keep it real and make it relevant in our time.

So - keep singing, keep praying.  
If you want to obsess over a president,  
obsess over George Washington who  
once said:  
**“Labor to keep alive in your breast  
that little spark of celestial fire,  
called conscience”** (George Washington).

Avoid smoke, kindle fire in your heart.  
In the pursuit of high adventure, may we flourish,  
so exposing the saving grace of God’s love,  
for us, for all people, for the world.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,  
for the demands of the day are many;  
so be charitable as you read; and remember:  
the contents of this sermon have not been edited  
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*