

Pentecost

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“When the Day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place.” Dozens and dozens of times, I read or had read to me that passage from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, but I missed the enormity of that statement. I would treat the first sentence of the second chapter of Acts as a preface; it was the stage setting for the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit’s descent on the apostle. That is how I read it. I read it several times in preparation for today’s sermon and read right past it. I read through the rest of the verses hoping to find something inspiring for today’s sermon. Then, all of a sudden, I was inspired to understand that sentence.

One Pentecost, many centuries ago, in an upper room in Jerusalem, the entire church was all together in one place. Not a congregation, not a diocese, not a denomination, not a branch of Christianity, but the disciples; *all* of the disciples and the *only* disciples of Jesus Christ were all together in one place. How many was that, it doesn’t say; 15-20? It could not have been too many. They were all in a room in a house. But, that small group of people, fired by the Holy Spirit, produced billions and billions of Christians over 20 centuries. Christ Episcopal Church, you and I, we are direct descendants of the disciples in that upper room.

A few years ago, I was awarded a Lily Grant for a sabbatical in Europe. I started out in Rome, the city where St. Paul died and the city where St. Peter died. I made a pilgrimage from the Eternal City to Kent in England following the footsteps of Canterbury’s first Archbishop, St. Augustine. My hope for that pilgrimage was

to understand the spiritual impetus that caused Christians to begin new things. I visited old Christian places to understand how new Christian events sprung into being. Every ancient cathedral, ancient monastery and ancient convent was once a new enterprise. Where now stands a magnificent cathedral in Canterbury, the Spiritual Center of worldwide Anglicanism, there once stood a small wood and stone monastery built by St. Augustine and 30 monks from Italy. St. Augustine died in 604, fourteen hundred years ago. It seems so long ago, ancient history, but, at one time, Canterbury was fresh, rugged, missionary territory. Like the disciples at Pentecost, all of the Christians in Kent could fit into one room. The entire Church of England was fewer than the average attendance at one of our 8:00am services. A few scared monks, who at one point early in the journey, tried to go back to Rome; they got as far as Canne and lost their nerve. St. Augustine was forced to go back to Pope Gregory the Great and return with a letter from the Pope giving encouragement to those monks to go on with their journey.

A few scared monks began worldwide Anglicanism. A few scared disciples began worldwide Christianity. The Power of the Holy Spirit made everything possible. The power of the Holy Spirit made up for the fear, the inexperience, the ignorance, made up for all of the human weakness. The power of the Holy Spirit is given in grace and grace makes good works possible.

Many people puzzle over how their salvation is implemented. We are saved by grace but aren’t we supposed to do something? If all I need for salvation is to believe in Jesus, then why do saints like Augustine risk their lives crossing

continents for Jesus? People puzzle over salvation by grace, salvation by works. Well, I have an answer to this puzzle that works for me: Yes, we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. But, grace through faith is like electricity. It is not some thing; it is some action. Electricity is electrons in motion doing some work. Grace is switched on by a special type of work. Grace wants you to take on something, some project that you cannot do. That way, no one gets to brag before God about all of the things that they have accomplished.

If you have accomplished something one of two things is true: 1. What you have accomplished is no big deal. Whatever it is you did, you were given the time, talent and opportunity to do it as a gift from God. Or, 2. What you accomplished *is* a big deal, a really big deal, in fact it's such a big deal that you could not do it. The Holy Spirit made up for everything you lacked. You were given grace.

Let me suggest, as a classic example of grace and works, works and grace. The best example I know is the 12-step program. Recovery has 12 steps -- 12 things to be done, 12 works. Step #1 is to admit that you are powerless.

Great works for your soul begin when you take on something you cannot do. There is some great work you have not done because you cannot do it, because it's too hard! Well, that is your opportunity for grace. This is how you know God is in your life, really feel the presence, power and love of the Holy Spirit. Do something you cannot do. Forgive that hurt that you've carried for so long. Do it because it is impossible for you to forgive that! Volunteer to work with the poor, the elderly, or the AIDs patient; volunteer just because it terrifies you. That is where the grace is! Teach Sunday School because you don't think you can. Sign up for

a Bible study because you don't have the time. There's no room for grace in the things you can do.

Beginning on July 1st, this congregation will be in transition. You will be without a Rector and yet those pastoral, liturgical and executive ministries that are part of a Rector's duties will not go away with the Rector. The Diocese will send a supply priest to take care of some of the liturgical duties but the rest will fall upon the members of this congregation including the search for the next Rector. You may think that you do not have the time, that it is all going to be too hard, that you do not know what you need to know in order to help, which is exactly the opportunity that grace needs to work. All you need is to be open to the work and determined that you will give your best effort. Grace will provide what is necessary to fulfill God's will.

I am predicting that there will be many opportunities for grace this summer. I predict that you will be presented with new ministries, new opportunities for grace. Who knows what the Holy Spirit will do? The Holy Spirit turned St. Augustine and 30 frightened monks into the founders of the Church of England and worldwide Anglicanism. The Holy Spirit turned a room full of timid disciples into evangelists to the world.

Great things are in store for a faithful Christ Episcopal Church. As for me, I'll be watching to see what the Holy Spirit is doing with you and trying some new things myself.

Amen.