

Sunday May 28th, 2023

Pentecost

Numbers 11:24-30 and 1 Corinthians 12:1-13

“Manifestation”

How appropriate it is that our church anniversary falls on Pentecost Sunday. Today history is swirling all around us and we need to remember that every day we are living in what will be history. History for our descendants to study and draw meaning from.

There are few dates in my life’s history, where I know exactly and, in some detail, where I was and what I was doing. I know where I was and what I was doing on August 18th, 1984; I was getting married in Binbrook. I know where I was and what I was doing on November 28th, 1989; I was witnessing the birth of my son Joshua. I know where I was on August 13, 1991; I was in again at the Hawkesbury Hospital witnessing the birth of Rachel.

There is one other date that I shall also remember with great clarity as I am sure many of you will. I know where I was, and what I was doing on September 11, 2001. I remember that it was a clear sunny day, and I was busy cutting the grass at our farmhouse in Selkirk. I remember it because I wasn’t at my task very long, before Laura came out to tell me that an airplane had crashed into the World Trade Towers in New York.

I immediately went into the house to see the live video on the television of the smoke pouring out of the tower and tape recordings of the crash but went back to my grass cutting; only to have Laura return to tell me a second plane had hit the other tower. I am afraid, after that news my grass cutting for the day was essentially over. Like millions of others, I sat glued to my television watching the smoke pouring from the towers and later the Pentagon; all the while wondering what in the world was going on.

One plane crashing into the tower was a terrible accident, but two on the same day. Like so many others, I too, found myself growing anxious about what I witnessed, especially as the towers collapsed and a great flood of debris swept through Manhattan. Later my anxiety grew as hundreds of flights worldwide were canceled. I became very concerned when I remembered that my parents were in the Mediterranean on a cruise, and it might be several weeks before they could fly home.

As the events continued to unfold, I must admit, like millions of other parents, I also considered going and getting my kids from school. It was very clear within a matter of a few minutes that this event was no accident; to that fact, most of us were sure. We longed for answers, and in time we longed for action. Perhaps we didn’t want all the beefed-up security at airports as we took our shoes off and could not take bottled water on the plane, but “better safe than sorry” we agreed.

In the weeks, and months that followed, we learned a new word, “al-Qaeda”. We also learned about a shadowy character named Osama Ben Laden, whose execution was eventually carried out with military precision in Pakistan. The official conclusion was that terrorists had struck at the very heart of western capitalism. With incredible planning, groups of men, had hijacked four planes fully fueled and proceeded to kill thousands. That’s the story; or is it?

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Not that long ago I read a very insightful book called, “Among the Truthers” by National Post reporter Jonathan Kay. If you’ve never heard of that label before, Truthers are people who do not accept the official version of major events.

Truthers, as a group, question authorities and governments, casting doubt on official conclusions by investigators. Jonathan Kay writes that most Truthers are middle aged men, and even presents a provocative theory that becoming a Truther is a symptom of a mid-life crisis. Some men, Kay states, buy a sports car, or have an affair, while others become Truthers.

Specifically, many Truthers believe that the US government planned the 9/11 event as a pretext to invade Iraq. The Truthers’ claim is that government agents planted explosives in the towers to bring them down. They argue that no plane, even fully fueled, could do such damage. Some Truthers even claim that the planes were remote controlled like *Predator Drones*, and at least one Truther claims that no plane hit the Pentagon.

You may feel such a position is ridiculous, but with the advent of the internet, the number of believers is growing. Truthers are also the ones behind questioning: President Obama’s birth certificate, the JFK conspiracy, anti-Semitic conspiracy plots, concerns about vaccines and many other ideas about how the general public has been deceived. Truthers do not trust scientists, politicians, or any other traditional authorities.

Many famous and well-educated people are Truthers. Donald Trump is a truther. Suzanne Summers, and Sarah Palin are just a few of those you might have heard of before. I raise this with you because Truthers are a serious threat to our society, at least according to Jonathan Kay. The perpetuation of grandiose conspiracy theories, through books, lectures, radio programs, and the internet, cast doubt on any sense of objective truth. The complex, and often twisted logic of Truthers, is eroding confidence and blurring the lines of objective journalism.

Being that this is Pentecost Sunday, I wanted to remind us all, that one of the ministries of the Holy Spirit, according to the Apostle Paul, is to grant us discernment to know what is true. (vs. 3) Let me point out to you that the ability to discern the truth, particularly about God, is a gift from the Holy Spirit. Discernment is one of several gifts granted by the Holy Spirit for the benefit of the church.

I do not believe that Paul intended to give us an exhaustive list of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, but he highlights some critical ones. The Holy Spirit gives for the benefit of the church: the ability to give wise advice, the gift of special knowledge (insight), special faith (meaning a faith that seems above our normal level, the power to heal, the ability to prophesy, to discern whether it is the Holy Spirit or another spirit at work, speaking in unknown languages (tongues), and the interpretation of these languages.

Paul writes that there are different ways that God works in our lives, but God remains the same. I take this to mean that God is incredibly creative in working in and through us to minister to and strengthen his church. There is no set formula. What works for one person to meet their needs, probably won’t work for someone else, but not to worry; God has a unique plan for them as well.

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The gifts we receive are not for our own personal use, or glorification. These spiritual gifts are for the benefit of the whole church. The celebration of Pentecost is a recognition that, as Christ's followers we were never intended to go it alone. The Holy Spirit grants me gifts to use to build up you; grants you gifts to build me up; and gifts so we can all build each other up.

Implied here is that we need each other; especially if we are to live a full and abundant life. This is what Pentecost teaches us and our Christian experience teaches us. The sharing of spiritual gifts with each other is our purpose as a church. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are recognition that we depend fully on the grace of God, expressed in our Christian fellowship. Tony Campolo, a noted: Christian sociologist, evangelist, and writer, talks about a very special moment in the life of his home church.

These are his words, *"I belong to a large African American congregation in Philadelphia that for decades was pastured by Dr. D. W. Hoggard. When he died and the congregation sought a new pastor, I was amazed to discover they had selected a young man who was just graduating from seminary.*

I couldn't believe it. I told the chairman of the deacons that a large church like ours should have somebody who was experienced. I told him that we needed somebody who was a great preacher! The response to my inquiry taught me something about what the church can be when it is at its best. The old deacon looked at me and said, "Then we're just going to have to take this young man and make him great!"

Campolo concludes, *"What a wonderful attitude. The deacon was aware that a pastor's effectiveness is largely dependent upon what the people in the congregation enable him or her to be."* (Campolo- Let Me Tell You a Story, pg. 163) I think this same truth applies not only to clergy, but to all of us. The effectiveness, of each of us, in ministering in the name of Christ, is largely dependent on the: nurturing, training, support and prayer of the fellowship.

No greater misconception has ever been expressed than the sentiment that you don't need to go to church to be a Christian. Perhaps that is true; we are saved by grace, not by works. However, I am sure that you will not be an effective Christian for the cause of Christ, unless you dwell among God's people. You will never reach your full potential for Christ, unless you minister to and are ministered to by God people on a regular basis.

If we truly want to know what the truth is, then we need to be among God's people, because someone among us can give wise advice and a special knowledge. If we need healing or some other miracle, we need to be among God's people. If we really want to know, if God is the one speaking to us or some other spirit, then we need to be among God's people. If you need those gifts, and do not possess them yourself, then you will find them among God's people.

I shall be very bold here, but I am convinced that you cannot be at your best for Christ without fellowship. Walking through life all alone, we will tend, no matter how faithful we think we are, to bend, change, twist or set aside many aspects of God's truth. Walking the Christian life alone is impossible because none of us can hold all the truth, all the experience, and as mentioned, all the gifts, on our own.

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The greatest achievements for the betterment of people in the church and I believe in the world, have all been made because the person leading the charge had other faithful people surrounding them with encouragement and prayer. Such was the case for William Wilberforce, who pushed the British Parliament to abolish slavery. At one point, early in the struggle, Wilberforce was very discouraged and about to give up.

His elderly friend, John Wesley, the noted preacher, and hymn writer, heard about his troubles and from his deathbed called for paper and pen, to send Wilberforce a letter. With trembling hand, Wesley wrote, *“Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them stronger than God? Oh, be not weary of well-doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery shall vanish away before it.”*

Six days after writing that letter, Wesley died. But Wilberforce fought for forty-five more years and in 1833, three days before his own death, saw slavery abolished in Britain. Do you see the power of a brother or sister in Christ, stepping up to encourage us, or correct us, or even heal us? Would Wilberforce have stayed the course, to see his fight to end slavery succeed, without Christian friends surrounding him?

Think about your own life now. How many challenges have you faced that threatened to shatter your hope, only to discover your brothers and sisters in Christ rallying around you? How much strength was offered to you because they: lifted you up in prayer, sent you a note of encouragement, paid a visit, brought a meal, and a whole host of other caring ministries? One of the revealing things I have learned over the years is the nature of what most people truly fear.

Most people I have dealt with in hospital, or in long term care facilities, do not fear illness, even terminal illness, or the ravages of aging. Most people I talk with fear only two things when faced with their mortality. They fear pain, which can be managed by medication, and they fear ... being alone. So many times, I have visited folks in hospital, or in a care facility, and they express appreciation for their church family.

Inevitably, at some point, they express how they don't know how people without faith cope with such experiences. I don't know the answer to that one, either. What I have seen are people of faith, surrounded by a loving church family, go through some rough experiences, and yet do so with confidence and yes, even sometimes joy. Surrounded by loving Christian brothers and sisters, there is a confidence that the world does not understand.

Lying in a hospital bed, on medication, facing surgery or even death itself, Christ's people declare together, “No despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.” (Rom. 8:37)

The world shakes its head in disbelief when during even the worst situation God's people repeat the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:28, “And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose.”

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Notice Paul says, “We know”. It is our experience as followers of Christ that all things work together for good.

Not some things, not 50% of the time but all things. Such confidence! But we know there are times when our confidence is shattered, and when we feel less than victorious, what the? Paul writes, “If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honoured, all the parts are glad.” (Rom. 12:26) We are in this together. If someone is without confidence the rest of us are confident in them.

If they haven't words to pray, we shall pray. This is the gift of Pentecost. The resources and power of Christ are made available to us together, as his body. Did you know that the true meaning of the word “prophet” means someone who brings a message from God? Did you know that we all can be prophets? As Christ's body, we incarnate his love and grace and bear them to others.

With our presence, and our compassion and our love, we bring God's message of hope to each other. We need each other. We want to be with each other, because together all things work for good and we are together more than conquerors.