

Preaching at Pentecost: Is There Unity in the Spirit?

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There is a clear imbalance in the distribution of significant feast days in the church year. We move rapidly from Advent through Christmas and on to Epiphany. Barely is there time to catch our breath before Lent begins. Holy Week and Easter follow quickly. Many protestants skip quickly over Ascension, but then Pentecost arrives. Six months—more or less—of the calendar year are gone. But now, Pentecost Season is upon us. Granted that Pentecost itself is obviously significant, and we may even figure out something intelligible to the congregation and to ourselves for Trinity Sunday the next week, but we are still faced with almost six months more of Pentecost Season. For many pastors, that is a long, blank period with little unity or coherence.

There is some justification for this feeling. Pentecost Season—earlier called “Trinity Season”—is an elastic time period, holding the Easter Cycle past to the Christmas Cycle of the next liturgical year. It can vary by several weeks, depending on how early Easter has fallen. It probably could be lessened by a few months, and the structure of the year would remain untouched. It is as long as it is because that is the space created in the calendar by the distance between Easter and Christmas. There is no other rationale.

At the same time, historically, the church has used this time period very well. There *is* a coherence to the Pentecost Season. The lectionary texts selected for the time show this. The coherence is more obvious, however, if we know the theological themes that are intended to be present.

One further issue needs to be mentioned. Though this half year of Pentecost is somewhat bereft of days of liturgical significance, it is rich with national holidays and other secular celebrations in the United States. Father’s Day and less frequently, Mother’s Day often fall on Pentecost. This often presents an emotional conflict for the minister. More important, the Reformed tradition has insisted that the church take note of significant national holidays. Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Election Day, and Thanksgiving all can fall during the Pentecost Season. These days may break the seeming monotony of the liturgical season, but they may also interrupt any unity that has been established unless some connection is made between the national celebrations and what the church understands to be the importance of Pentecost.

With all of this in mind, let us look at the theological coherence of the season.

The Theological Coherence of the Season

The third section of the Apostles’ Creed states: “I believe in the Holy

Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” These are not a list of miscellaneous items of belief that were left over from the first section of the Creed. They are all somehow related to the work of the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost Day it is clear that the church is the creation of the Holy Spirit. The communion of saints is in part a description of what the church is. The forgiveness of sins is also brought to us by the Spirit and through the church. The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting also are the culmination of the work of the Holy Spirit in us. It is the way in which the church militant is finally transformed into the church triumphant.

There are two days of particular liturgical significance that occur late in the Pentecost Season, and that show clearly some of the meaning of the whole season. They are World Communion Sunday and All Saints Day. The first stresses the catholic or universal character of the church in its global character. The season stresses the unity of the church throughout time, the link between Christians who live now and the faithful who have gone before. It is unfortunate that this latter emphasis has been eliminated from many of our churches and Reformation Day substituted. It is possible to combine them, but the total elimination of any reference to the oneness of the church throughout all time lessens greatly our comprehension of the communion of saints. The oneness of the church, then, is of prime significance in the Pentecost Season.

The Lessons

The majority of the season, however, is far less specifically related to the church. In the lectionary now in use, twenty-six Sundays will use passages from the Gospel of Luke, in order, from the 7th to the 23rd chapters. In terms of the narrative material, this means that the lessons cover material from Jesus’s ministry. Most are teachings that show what discipleship means. The danger is always that these passages will be dealt with in a totally individual fashion, reducing the meaning to specific virtues that Christians are to have. The passages gain in significance if they are seen as ways in which the church is to respond, as corporate virtues rather than as private ones. For instance, Luke 12:13-21 is the passage listed for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost. It concerns the rich man who built bigger barns for his harvests, only to die and leave all of that behind. There may very well be ways in which that can be preached to individuals. We all need to hear that message. But what would it mean to a congregation—as a congregation—especially if it were clearly dealing with the budget of the church? The personal application to individual Christians might be taken much more seriously if Christians could see the church as an institution set an example.

The last few lessons of the season stress a more apocalyptic theme, or at least speak of the presence of the kingdom in Jesus’s own presence. We shall return to this characteristic of the close of the Pentecost Season later.

Before leaving the Gospel lessons, however, a few other comments may be helpful. Obviously, there is need for selectivity in taking relatively few lessons from so many long chapters in Luke’s Gospel. Much has been omitted from the

lectionary. Sometimes this is because the material really fits in another season. But often it is simply eliminated all together. The preacher may wish to look at the chapters as a whole, and note what has been omitted from an lesson. In these particular lections, there is a clearly discernible tendency to include very familiar passages and leave out strange ones that are rarely dealt with. If the preacher has been through the lectionary several times, it might be good to adapt the lectionary this time, and preach on some portions of the Gospel that otherwise might never be heard by the congregation—or preached by the pastor. As part of the unfamiliarity, most of the passages having to do with demons are avoided. Pastors may be grateful for that omission! However, the struggle of Christians against evil in the world is thereby also avoided. For instance, the entirety of the 8th chapter is eliminated. It begins with the involvement of many important women as disciples, but one had seven demons. It goes on to the Geresene demoniac, and concludes with some strange healings. Yet what power there is if the church knows the character of the Lord who has such authority. This is necessary for us to know if we are to be willing to enter into any struggle with evil in our world. A good hermeneutic is needed, clearly, but the avoidance of these passages for the entire season leads to a distorted view of discipleship, one that does not really include an engagement with powers of evil that are beyond our strength but clearly under the dominion of Jesus who is the Lord of the church.

In general, the Old Testament lection has been chosen with the Gospel lesson in mind. For the 11th Sunday after Pentecost, mentioned above, a passage from Ecclesiastes has been selected to go with the one about the rich man and his useless new barn. The Ecclesiastes verses, 2:18-23, speak of the vanity of saving things for someone else to inherit. It is not clear, however, why the selection ends before the 26th verse. The Old Testament lesson may often be expected to be quite secondary to the Gospel reading. If the sermon is to be taken from the Old Testament reading, the preacher may need to use some judgment as to where it begins or ends, or when it becomes primary rather than secondary.

The Epistle lesson may or may not have any clear link to the other readings. Often there is an attempt to give a good selection from various epistles, with some order involved in their presentation. For instance, in the C cycle, there are six lessons from Galatians, followed by four from Colossians, four from Hebrews, one from Philemon, and seven from the Pastoral Epistles. The continuity that is involved here is not interrupted in order to find an Epistle selection that is more appropriate for the Gospel lesson that has been chosen. However, because of the character of the Epistles—that they in general have to do with the life of the church—there is often a connection that can be made. If these selections are to be the dominant ones for the sermon, the exact beginning and end may also need to be examined.

There is a further characteristic of the Pentecost Season that is often overlooked. Traditionally, the close of this season meshes well with the beginning of Advent. The means by which this is done is the emphasis on the Second Coming of Christ. The beginning of Advent includes this theme, as do the last few weeks of the Pentecost period. Specifically, in Cycle C, Sundays 24 through

27 stress this in the Epistle lessons from 2 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, the Old Testament passages from Malachi, and the Gospel sections from Luke. Usually these are passages that imply the nearness of judgment as well as of salvation. They put a seriousness to the whole question of how we live our lives as disciples and as the church. The Pentecost Season ends with a world of judgment on our lives, preparing us again to be aware of our need for a Savior, a theme picked up by Advent. The last Sunday in Epiphany has the same emphasis, and is used if necessary for an additional Sunday.

Planning for the Whole Season

If one were to plan for the whole Pentecost Season at one time, the unity of the period could more readily be indicated. For instance, the general movement of discipleship toward judgment could be introduced more gradually. The character of the church as one body could be emphasized in October, beginning with spacial unity on World Communion Sunday and concluding with temporal unity on All Saints Day. In addition, such emphasis on All Saints would make a fitting beginning for the increased apocalyptic or at least eschatological character of the last month of Pentecost. Thanksgiving Day comes in the midst of this time, and might be improved by the awareness of judgment that the time involves. In fact, the old hymn "Come, Ye Thankful People Come" combines the thankfulness for the harvest with the awareness of God's harvest which is the Day of the Lord.

Having spent much of the discussion on the last portion of the season, let us conclude by looking again at the start of the season.

Pentecost Day is the culmination of the Easter Season. The resurrection has occurred. The work of Christ has been accomplished, as far as the earthly ministry is concerned. It has reached the triumphant conclusion in the ascension. Now the Holy Spirit is sent and the community of the church is empowered. In one sense, then, Pentecost Sunday stands as the finale of the previous season as well as ushering in the new one. It needs to be planned for then in regard both to what comes before and what comes afterward. The Sunday following Pentecost—Trinity Sunday—may need to be emphasized more clearly in our day than in times past. There is so much confusion in the minds of so many that a sermon helping to show the meaning, even if not mentioning the doctrinal formulation, would be useful. Otherwise, it is quite likely that the impression can be created that Jesus is now finished, and the Holy Spirit has taken over. All the significance of the Risen Jesus as Lord of the church, which would help enormously in preaching the Gospel passages for the next several months, would therefore be gone. The stress on the Trinity assures us that the work for Christ continues, even as the work of the Father is still in our midst. The Spirit has not totally replaced the others, though the gift of the Spirit to the church is a new beginning in the work of redemption in the world.

With some planning, what might otherwise be half a year of topical sermons, unrelated to each other, can be brought back in to the great sweep of the liturgical year.



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