

Pentecost Sunday
First Trinity Lutheran Church
June 4, 2006

Signs of Pentecost

As you observed since the moment you walked into the sanctuary this morning, today is Pentecost. Pentecost is one of the great festivals of the church year. Pentecost is indeed one of the happy days, one of the festival days, and the mood is that of a party. To help us in our festive mood today, we have four contemporary symbols that remind us of Pentecost: balloons, birthday cake, candle flames, and the baptism of Nathan Lopilato.

First, we have decorated our sanctuary with bright red helium filled balloons rising from the pews. A mobile of a dove is hanging above the altar. During this service you may see the wind, in this case air conditioning, move the balloons and the mobiles. These balloons and mobile remind us that God is like the wind: invisible, moving, mysterious, blowing across the universe. The word for God in the Old Testament is “Ruach” which means breath. God breathed into Adam and gave him life. God is breath. God is life. God breathed into you and me and gave us life. Pentecost reminds us that God is the invisible life force within the universe. Without breath, there would be no life at all.

A person cannot see the wind but only the effects of the wind. Likewise with us; we cannot see God but only the effects of God. We see God’s footprints but not God’s feet. We see God’s handprints but not God’s hands. We see God’s footprints in the lakes and we see God’s handiwork with the mountains, but we cannot see God face to face. A basic tenet of the Christian faith is that God is invisible and powerful like the wind. The balloons and the mobile remind us of God’s invisibility.

Second, Pentecost is a day that reminds us of the church’s birthday. After worship at the social hour David and Sharon along with their family prepared for us a Pentecost food feast complete with a cake. Why a cake? Because today is the birthday of the Christian church. “Happy Birthday Church.” This cake reminds us that today is the birthday of the church.

Third, as we light the candles on the cake the dancing of the candlelight reminds us of those tongues of fire on that first Pentecost morning. What does fire represent? Fire is energy; fire is power; fire is passion. Fire is energy for Jesus Christ, and on Pentecost, there was a new quality of fire and energy for Jesus Christ. The flame is another Pentecost symbol.

Forth as we baptize baby Nathan this morning we are reminded our own baptism. How the water has washed us clean, and how the spirit has entered our lives and given us special gifts to use in service to others. Again it is not the water that saves nor is it the act of baptism itself, but the water, mixed with the promise of God. And this mixture is the saving power.

And so on this Pentecost morning we use these contemporary symbols to remind us of the birthday party of the church: balloons and cakes and candles flames and baptism.

Amidst the symbols of Pentecost let us revisit what happened on that first Pentecost morning? The disciples and other believers were gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem. The disciples had been told to wait and pray for the Holy Spirit, for the powerful presence of God to come upon them. So the disciples waited and prayed, waited and prayed. Finally they sensed the presence of God blowing among them. Suddenly, there were like tongues of fire on each of them. There was a new energy and a new power within them. Suddenly, they began to speak in a many different languages, in the language of the Medes, the Cappadocians, the Asians, the Egyptians, and the Libyans. It was clear: Christians were not to remain in Jerusalem but go into the entire world, proclaiming the goodness about Jesus Christ in the various mother tongues of the nations.

On that first Pentecost morning, there was a new sense of mission. There was also a new power within. There was a new energy and urgency to carry out their mission. There was energy inside of them to accomplish their goals. These people had new courage to face persecutions. They had new boldness to be more outspoken for their faith. They had a new powerful passion within to stand before family, friends, neighbors, and fellow workers and

boldly tell the good news of Jesus Christ and his impact on their daily lives. There was plenty of power.

There was also a new sense of community. These first Christians took their possessions and sold their material goods to help those in need. There was also a new sense of loving within this community: sharing problems, sharing each other's tragedies, sharing resources. These were not hundreds of individuals sitting together in a room, hundreds of individuals who could care less about what was happening to the person seated next to them. Instead there were hundreds of individuals who experienced community love and sharing of resources like they had never experienced it before.

That is what happened early one morning in Jerusalem in the year 30 AD, fifty days after the Jewish Passover. What a gift this gift of the Spirit is! But how do you use it? What do you use it for? We too are often in a quandary as to how we use this gift of the spirit. It is not unlike receiving a gift from a friend or family member and not knowing what you would use it for. Have you ever received a gift like that?

In Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior, much is made of thank-you notes, especially thank-you notes for weddings presents. One of Miss Manners' sample letters reads as follows:

Dear Aunt Patience:

Rhino and I are thrilled with the magnificent silver sugar shaker you sent us. It adds not only beauty and dignity to our table, but amusement, too, as some of our friends who are both ignorant and daring have not waited for the berries to be served, but have shaken it over their meat. "This could only have come from your Aunt Patience," said one, and we were proud to say that it had. Rhino joins me in thanking you for your kindness. We look forward to having you in our new home.

Love,

Daffodil

Most of us have received gifts that we weren't quite sure how to use. We smile politely, say "thank you very much," but think to ourselves, "what on earth am I supposed to do with this?" With any luck, the giver will notice a look of perplexity on our faces, and give us some clue as to the intended purpose of the item. But, just as often, we are left to figure it out for ourselves. Sometimes we get it right, sometimes we don't, and there are times that we just never find out how this beautiful but strange gift is supposed to be used.

I would bet that it wasn't too different for Jesus' disciples in this morning's gospel. They receive the gift of the Holy Spirit -- and the question could be asked. "What on earth am I supposed to do with this?" Even if they don't say it out loud, the question is implied. Nobody had ever received that gift before, there was no helpful person at the registry at Bloomingdale's or Nordstrom's to tell them just why they should have this particular item and how to use it. But it becomes clear from the teachings of Jesus that the disciples are to use this gift to forgive sins and to be bearers of peace.

Today on this Feast Day of Pentecost we will baptize little Nathan David. We will say to Nathan after he has had water poured and oil placed on his head "We receive you into the household of God and we your family pledge to live in faithfulness to Jesus Christ as you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Nathan receives today the best that God has promised to give. And like expensive gifts given at other occasions like weddings, Christmas, graduations, birthdays, etc., the gift of the Spirit is used in service, and love for others, those within the Christian community, but also to the wider world -- to show the gracious hospitality and welcoming love of God for all of humankind.

We bring the beautiful and precious gifts of our baptism to the banquet table of God's family. And, it is not up to us to make sure that all the place- settings match. Each of us has something different and distinctive to bring to this table. At God's table, every color, shape and texture of dinnerware -- from the finest gold-banded china to hand-thrown pottery, and even

paper plates -- is needed, wanted and welcome. Until everyone has a place setting at the table, a place specially designed for that person, there is something missing at the feast.

In the church, our visible household of God on earth, we need to welcome all the ways that God has given us this wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit. And, as the disciples did in today's gospel, we can trust that God will tell us what to do with the gifts that have been given to us. Today, we celebrate the arrival of our newest, Nathan. We don't know right at this moment what he will be, what he will do and what direction he will take in his life with the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given him. We will have to wait and see what his gifts will look like, and rejoice in what he will bring to the banquet table.

But here today, on this first day of the Pentecost season, as we baptize Nathan and renew our own baptismal vows, we remember and give thanks for the gifts of the Holy Spirit we have been given; we renew our promises to use those gifts not only for ourselves and for those closest to us, but for all of God's people and all of the created order. All of us, married or single, adults or children, no matter what categories we use to distinguish ourselves, we are a part of God's family.

Nathan, we welcome you into the family, where your life will be richer and fuller than it was before, and we will be enriched by your presence and the gifts you bring. AMEN