

Pentecost and Beyond

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 1st of May 2005. The preacher is Jim Fleming.

His sermon is entitled Pentecost and Beyond and is based on Acts chapter 1 verses 1 to 11.

The feast of Pentecost normally is May or June. This year it is early. It is the greatest variety of ingathering in the year.

It begins the summer harvest. Nor the time of year for the seven Jewish feasts do the people experience such variety. And of course that's why we are told that the greatest variety of language background and cultural background are baptized in the church at the feasts of the great variety of ingathering.

May I remind you however that earlier in their lives Jesus' disciples were not interested in a great variety of ingathering. They were like many of us raised as birds of a feather flocked together.

[1 : 1 4] In fact, many of them believed in salvation by separation. You are saved by whom you do not mix with. May I remind you that for the first time in his life Simon Peter went into the house of a non-Jew in Acts chapter 10.

Shaking his finger at Cornelius and saying you know it is unlawful for a Jew to mix with someone of another nation. That makes no sense if Peter has ever once been in the house of a Gentile.

His hometown, Bethsaida, is less than a mile and a half from a Gentile town named Julius. You don't remember Julius from the Gospels, do you?

But five disciples are from Bethsaida just a short distance away. Let me give you the other big non-Jewish towns that touch the Sea of Galilee.

The Sea of Galilee is only 7 by 12 miles in size. Here's the big towns around the sea. You see how you do. In addition to Julius, you have Philoteria, Cenebrus, Hippus, Tiberius.

[2 : 3 0] Oh, Tiberius. Oh, it brought people from Tiberius to see Jesus. The disciples never went in Tiberius as far as we know. They didn't mix with them.

There are lots of people they didn't mix with. Do you remember he had to take them through Samaria? You picture them dragging their feet. They were half-Jews, worshipping the wrong place, having the wrong version of the Bible.

You're not supposed to marry a Samaritan. You certainly would never mix with a Gentile. Did you know some rabbis taught if the shadow of a Gentile crosses you, you have to use a ritual immersion bath.

That's what Jesus' disciples' backgrounds were like. They were also very prejudiced against women, against people who were unclean, like demoniacs.

Remember, we have Jesus speaking to a Samaritan woman. As they came back from bargaining in town for bread, they marveled amongst themselves that Jesus was speaking to, listen, a double noun.

[3 : 43] For Jesus, it is Samaritan person. Samaritan's an adjective. Woman person.

He took them across to the other side of the sea, and a double noun ran down the steep slope, a Gergesene demoniac, a Gentile, unclean person.

I don't know about you, but I picture the 12 disciples jumping right back in the boat as that guy ran down that slope. Do you remember how the story ended? He was clothed in his right mind, sitting at the feet of Jesus.

And he begged Jesus, let me come back to Capernaum with you and your disciples. I picture the 12 in the boat all going, huh? Simon Peter probably thought, what's my mother-in-law going to say?

They were meeting in his mother-in-law's house. I imagine Jesus looked at the man with great compassion, looked at the 12 turning purple in the boat, holding their breath, and then sadly said to the man, no, you better go to your own people and tell them what God has done for you.

[5 : 06] Jesus' disciples were not inclusive people. On the journey to Jerusalem, you have to go through a Gentile area on the border between the Decapolis and Samaria, and that's where they were when the disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven on people who didn't believe just like they believed.

You know, that's the very words of Osama bin Laden on September 11th. Allah has called down fire from heaven on the Zionists and the Crusaders. His words for Jews and Christians, Jesus had disciples who were full of hatred for anyone not like them.

Isn't it amazing his patience with them? And then it makes all the more amazing these stories we're reading in early Acts.

When we see them gradually including one type of person after another a little bit larger than their former circle about whom God loved.

It sounds strange for me to jump to this illustration, but did you know people who raise crabs inside captivity seek crabs, crustaceans.

[6 : 30] Remember, they have exoskeletons and as they grow their skeleton then gets too tight and there's just small little holes in their skeleton, the exoskeleton that allows an oxygen exchange. And if they don't shed that skeleton, they will suffocate.

But when you raise them in captivity, you have to put a conveyor belt in the pond or the area within the net of the sea because they have to walk out of their old skeleton.

If they can't move, they will die. They cannot shed their old skeleton. Of course, as soon as they shed that old skeleton that's smaller, they're very vulnerable because their surface is soft and it's scary to shed that skeleton.

They usually hide. But gradually as that new larger skeleton hardens, they come out again. It's amazing if I just quickly summarize for you the new skeletons that the early church grew into, each a little bit larger.

But you know, if they stayed still, they would have suffocated. And the book of Acts helped us follow Jesus' disciples from going from birds of a feather fought together, religious Jews just like us.

[7 : 48] That's how the church began. Then as we move on, we find in Acts 4, they even went to the villages around Jerusalem who believed. The suburbs started worshiping with them.

Of course, that's still folks just like us. Then we find in Acts 6, another skeleton, they have been talking to priests at the temple. Some temple priests believed in Jesus.

That's the very element of society that was responsible for returning Jesus over to the Roman authorities. Do you remember the two on the road to Emmaus speaking to the stranger?

How our chief priests and leaders had him put to death. And then, of course, we find yet another skeleton.

I'm so glad to see this one. Your church has walked into. They start a bilingual ministry. Remember in Acts 7, a special ministry for Greek-speaking Jews, not Aramaic and Hebrew-speaking Jews.

[8 : 53] It takes special intentionality for that. In fact, that ministry grew so much, remember, they had to approach seven deacons to minister, to serve to those because all those names they chose were Greek names, bilingual people to help in that ministry.

You could say, well, if they want to live and visit us in Jerusalem, they ought to learn our mother language. But you know, when foreigners come to your land, it's true, most of them would want to learn your language.

But it's very hard to pray from the depths of your heart in a second or third language.

When it comes to worship, very deep and personal things, your mother tongue is very important. I was once asked to speak to a group of young people about language and the announcement was being made several months in advance and the pastor said, now come up with a subject that the young people want to go.

He said, I don't want you to have the word prayer in it, but I want you to speak about prayer. He said, well, we came up with the kind of music God likes. The kids came.

[10 : 15] What is this weirdo going to say about the kind of music God likes? Of course, my theme was the music of the heart. And a true prayer of the depths of the heart is in your own language.

And these early followers of Jesus started a Greek-speaking ministry. Then we move on that in Acts 8, there had been a persecution of those who were working with the Greek-speaking congregation and Philip, not Philip the Apostle, but Philip the Evangelist, who was one of the seven Greek speakers, goes on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza to remember the story of the Ethiopian eunuch.

This may not sound like a very big step for you as we think about Pentecost and beyond, but this man from Ethiopia obviously knew some Greek.

He was the, worked for the candidate of Ethiopia. Did you know the palace of where he worked has been found in a city called Aksum in Ethiopia where 2,000-year-old headquarters of the Ethiopian monarchy has been found?

But you know he was not a Jew. So when he visited the temple, he was a God-fearer. He loved the God of Israel. We know for sure there have been Jews living in Ethiopia since 500 B.C. and he became acquainted with Judaism.

[11 : 43] But he could only go as far as the court of the Gentiles when he visited the temple. There's a sign there separating, and actually it was kind of a gross sign, it said, this sign informs you that anyone who takes a non-Jew beyond this point will be responsible for his death which will ensue.

You could only see the top of the temple beyond the wall. Now he's on his way back to Ethiopia and he's reading from the scroll of Isaiah, you recall. Did you know in antiquity you didn't know how to read to yourself?

Everyone always read out loud. Once you've been taught to read out loud, it's very hard to switch to read to yourself. Perhaps you recall knowing an elderly person only learned to read late in life and the audio side of their brain was so connected that they couldn't read without moving their lips.

Bishop Ambrose was speaking of St. Augustine in the 4th century and said, and he can even read to himself. Wow. So Philip knew what the eunuch was reading and it happened to be the 53rd chapter of Isaiah.

And he said, do you understand what you're reading? Of course, they would have been speaking in the international language of the Eastern Mediterranean in Greek and he said, how can I unless someone helped me? Come on up.

[13 : 09] And they rode together in this carriage. Tell me, is the prophet speaking of himself or someone else? A very good interpretive question. The eunuch answered.

Did you know that two curves down the road, they would have gotten to Isaiah 56? The book of Acts tells us very specifically and beginning with that point, Isaiah 53, they ran together.

May I remind you of what Isaiah 56 says? Thus saith the Lord to the eunuchs who love my law and observe my Sabbath. Boy, at least two if not four ears perked up at that point.

I will make a place for them within my house and within my walls and this is being read by a man who was just kept beyond the wall of the house of the Lord.

The prophet Isaiah hoped for the day that the Lord would make a way that the ritual and ceremonial restrictions to the law such as circumcision would no longer apply.

[14 : 21] Okay. And uncircumcised people would be able to enter the house of the Lord. I have to assume a mature audience for a moment.

Remember Jesus saying that some people were born eunuchs with a genital deformity. Some were eunuchs for the kingdom of God's sake. They chose celibacy as a part of their devotion to the Lord.

In the third category which is about 90%, some were made so by men. And wealthy officials to, quote, trust a servant or slave to be with the inner family when you're gone on business would not just castrate them but you need to know this, would remove the entire genitals.

The reason you need to know that is this man cannot physically be circumcised. That's why you're told he is a eunuch.

Even if he wanted to be circumcised, he could not. And he says to Philip when they get further down the road reading, well what would prevent me from being baptized?

[15 : 33] When you enter Judaism you must be circumcised if a male, male and females must give an offering to the temple and male and females must be baptized to this very day to enter Judaism.

What would prevent me from being baptized? and it's amazing this new skin the early church grew into, Philip said nothing. He understood that those distant days Isaiah 56 hoped for must be here now because the significance of what God did in Jesus.

I'm going to shock you for just a moment with my phraseology, but this means that Philip understood, listen carefully, some parts of the Bible no longer apply.

I know I got your attention for a moment. Did you know every single one of the moral and ethical laws of the Hebrew Bible of the Old Testament are repeated in the New Testament?

The difference is we don't find the repetition of all the ritual and ceremonial laws like those for ritual purity, circumcision, Sabbath, rules, etc.

[16 : 56] And even though it was a ritual requirement that one be circumcised, Philip understood what God did in Christ was so significant God would make a way.

Do you see how this growing point in the early church was a halfway point to Acts 10, my last point? Baptizing a man who could not be circumcised was the next step as the church became more inclusive.

Here is water that either got to a stream or a village with a ritual immersion bath. This man went his way rejoicing and Philip didn't notice any of the milestones himself.

He was caught up in the joy of the Lord and found himself in Azotus which is called Ashdod today. Oh, I'm already in Ashdod.

Then of course we have Acts 10 where Peter at a good Jewish port in Joppa is fishing I mean is on the rooftop looking down at boats his wife downstairs making nice kosher sandwiches.

[18 : 16] It was the noontime of prayer he fell asleep and he dreamt about food and he had a dream which would be a nightmare for a religious Jew.

he saw a sheet lowered from heaven with clean and unclean animals in it and a voice that said of all things bon appetit have a nice lunch being a good Jew he argued with the Lord no Lord I've never eaten anything unclean in my life and this happened three times which often was the case with Simon Peter and he woke up hearing the voice of some non-Jews calling from the outer courtyard servants and soldiers sent by Cornelius a non-Jew who had been praying the day before at the evening prayer and the Lord had told him to send his servants to Joppa and ask for a man named Peter I think you and I would misunderstand that verse to think it meant that Peter had ham and cheese sandwiches after that he was a Jew I'm sure he remained kosher the rest of his life what came to Peter was this hey I have people in two categories like I have animals clean and unclean and if you think that

Peter could have eaten the clean animals in that sheet and not the unclean animals you misunderstand it as well all you need is one clean animal and that makes all the clean animals unclean you understand the clean becomes unclean by touching them that's why Peter's never been in the house of an unclean person before he can't eat any of those animals what changed in his life thanks to the spirit of Christ working in his heart was hey I have people in two categories like I have animals clean and unclean and I shouldn't put people in two categories and he took six witnesses with him and walked to Caesarea and when he came into the house of an occupying officer of the Gentile army would that have been a wonderful moment to relish the officer bowed down at his feet and Peter answered properly get up

I am but a man and Cornelius and his house were baptized and Peter took those six witnesses back to Jerusalem did you know seven witnesses determines a case in the first century and an equal miracle these folks leading the early church raised from very provincial Jewish backgrounds had been so open to the work of the Lord's spirit in their lives it says and the elders of the church in Jerusalem rejoiced that God's spirit has been gracious to Gentiles you'll be happy to know I'm not going to take you all the way to 15 more skins the early church grew into in Acts but isn't it amazing how God's spirit takes us and helps our hearts become more inclusive and of course the basis for that is simple if God has been gracious to you and me can't we show a little grace to someone else remember the last supper

Jesus said I've washed your feet so you will remember that I've washed them my brothers and sisters in Christ may I remind you in closing whenever you and I point out someone else's dirt we have forgotten that the Lord has washed our feet whenever we speak against someone we should have a big sign flash on their forehead what's wrong with this picture God has given God's grace to us why are we judgmental of others love love that weird strange neighbor of yours with your weird strange heart God's given you a break that was our text this morning God's loyal love in spite of our unfaithfulness goodness and isn't it wonderful what God's spirit through

[23 : 02] Christ did to those early disciples and how inclusive and loving that community became lest as we prepare ourselves for our communion service ask that that same spirit help us to share God's love in a non-judgmental and inclusive way with others the way you forgive someone is you eat a meal with them Simon feed my sheep tend my lambs feed my sheep be reconciled with others we are the same as objects of God love we are about to sit at a table a table of reconciliation and let's open our hearts more fully to a new skin to grow into for the glory of God in Christ Amen