

The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World

Part 2: The Sixth Pentecost

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Scripture: Acts 2:1-21; John 14:12

I. First and Second Pentecost

Wouldn't it have been great to be with the disciples on the day of Pentecost? The Holy Spirit descended upon them, filling the disciples with joyful ecstasy such that people thought they were drunk. They were infused with prophetic vision to behold God's wonders and empowered to speak and be understood by those of many different nationalities, languages, and races who were assembled in Jerusalem for the "Feast of Weeks," known in Hebrew as Shavuot?

As those who attended Temple Israel's Shavuot celebration last night know, the Feast of Weeks celebrates the wheat harvest in Israel and commemorates the anniversary of the day when God gave the Torah to the nation of Israel on Mt. Sinai. The Greek word for this festival is Pentecost.

The First Pentecost, therefore, marks the giving of the Torah to bless the people of Israel. The Second Pentecost – the one we Christians celebrate today – marks God's sending of the Holy Spirit out into the entire world to bless the peoples of the world. This parallel was not lost on the early Christian community who understood this Second Pentecost to be none other than the fulfillment of the promise God originally made to Abraham – that through him would arise not only a great nation, but a nation through whom the entire world would be blessed.

The early Christian community was therefore centered around their experience of, and ongoing conversation with, the Holy Spirit, which they understood to be the living Presence of Christ. If you read the Book of Acts and Paul's Epistles, it is really quite impressive how carefully the early Christian community listened for the Spirit's voice, opened themselves to the Spirit's gifts, and acted on what they perceived to be the Spirit's call. It is also impressive how full of joy these early communities were. So joyful, in fact, that they would rather risk persecution, imprisonment, and even death by the Roman sword just to be a part of this joyous community. So joy-ful, even, that droves of orthodox Jews, followed by droves of pagans, would leave the relative safety of their own communities to join this growing band of outlawed, Spirit-filled souls.

Over the centuries, Christians have continually looked back with longing on the First Century community of Jesus-followers, holding them up as a model for what the best of Christian faith and community looks like.

Oh yes, to be with the disciples on Pentecost, or to live as a Christian anytime during the First Century must have been an incredible opportunity to experience God powerfully and directly, to experience transformation in community with others, and to live with a sense of purpose – a sense of God’s call to spread the joy they knew to the ends of the earth and fulfill God’s promise to Abraham.

Of course, it’s easy to look back on these Spirit-people and the times they lived in with rose-colored glasses. You may recall that we spent the first few months of this year taking a deeper look at Christians of the First Century. We know that, as joyous as they were, they also faced enormous pressure to renounce their faith just to stay alive. Often, adopting the Christian faith meant being disowned by your own family and friends. It meant losing your job. Sometimes your freedom. And yes, sometimes your life.

When I look back at the First Century, I am floored by how these people’s lives could be so wonderful, and so terrible, at the same time! If you weren’t deeply connected to the joy, the community, and your sense of divine Call, all the terrible things happening all around you could easily become overwhelming.

Many people in our day feel overwhelmed by the oppressiveness of our government or our society. Perhaps you do, yourself. The oppressiveness is very real and not to be taken lightly. But until large numbers of us start losing our jobs, start being disowned by our friends and family, and face the real risk of going to jail or even executed for our faith, our experience doesn’t hold a candle to theirs.

I wish some of us could step into a time machine and travel back to these First Century Christian communities and visit those who had fallen into despair. With the benefit of 2,000 years of hindsight, we could assure them that they were facing such difficulties not because something terrible had entered the world and was spreading like a virus, but because something profoundly good had entered the world, turning the old, established order on its head. Their trials and tribulations were a result of a great backlash by those who had benefitted from the old order and the way of life it had afforded them. We could even point to churches like Countryside, assuring them that we would not be here at all, continuing to sing praise to the God of Jesus, had it not been for their great sacrifices. Perhaps their vision would be renewed, along with their spirit, knowing that their suffering, and their dying, was not in vain.

Actually, I wish that someone from the future could step into a time machine and meet with us today. Just as it is clear as a bell today that the struggles of yesteryear were the

result of something profoundly good being poured out into the world like new wine bursting old wineskins, I am just as convinced that the upheaval that we are experiencing now – upheaval that will likely grow worse before it gets better – is the result of something profoundly good coming into our world, not something bad.

As my friend and sociologist of religion, the late Phyllis Tickle observed, about every 500 years, Western Civilization essentially goes through a great Pentecost-like experience. Years later we look back and call these times “Great Awakenings” or “Renaissances,” but they’re really times when we essentially go through a lot of messy, even violent upheavals and all hell breaks loose for a while.

As I have observed in a reflection last October, the last Pentecost-like Great Awakening to sweep over Western civilization was the Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries in Europe. Most people assume that the Renaissance would have been a great time to be alive. Spring was in the air. Everything seemed to be flowering – art, literature, science, politics, economics, philosophy, and theology. Everything seemed to be blossoming in response to some general, creative outpouring of Spirit.

Yet the average person’s experience of the Renaissance was not one of glee and creative exuberance, but of chaos and anxiety. New dreams and visions led to new ideas and awareness. New awareness led to radical shifts in the ways in which human society was organized and structured.

During the Renaissance, new political and economic systems came into being, as did new political alliances. New cultural and educational centers arose. The center of social life shifted from the rural countryside controlled by feudal lords, to cities controlled by merchants and bankers. Even ideas about what it means to be human, and how we are related to the Divine were shifting radically during the Renaissance.

The shifts were so deep, broad, and pervasive that seemingly wherever one turned, old institutions were crumbling and collapsing in on themselves in response to the new ones. In whatever areas you had attachments to the old way of life you felt directly threatened as, one by one, the old ways were decommissioned and replaced.

As all this was taking place, no one had the benefit of hindsight to judge who was right. Consider how it would have felt to live during the Renaissance. Who could you trust? The philosophers of old, or the new ones? Scientists defending the old world-views or those who constructed a vastly different model? Would you trust the old economic system, which was based on sharecropping and bartering, or the new system, which was based on money offered for the first time in human history by national banks? Would you support the established government, or join the revolution? (And if you joined the revolution, what would happen to those national banks?)

So vast was the crisis of trust during the Renaissance that even the most commonly acknowledged center of spiritual life – the Roman Catholic Church – was plunged into utter turmoil. For a while, two different popes vied for people’s allegiance. In fact, for a number of years, three popes fought each other – two in Italy and one in Avignon, France. Each pope excommunicated his rivals, claiming to be the one true pope. That’s how deep the crisis was in the institution that most people turned to for stability and vision in troubled times.

You see, this is what happens when the world experiences yet another Pentecost and God fulfills visions like the prophet Joel’s. Young people see visions and old people dream dreams and the societies’ tables are toppled. Apparently the “heavenly” doesn’t break into our world without first breaking it apart.

II. The Sixth Pentecost

If the First Pentecost was marked by the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people, which changed the course of human history, and the Second Pentecost was marked by the disciples experiencing the Holy Spirit, changing the course of human history again, then if Phyllis Tickle is right and a Pentecost-like outpouring of the Spirit shakes things up roughly every five hundred years, then the Third Pentecost happened late in the 5th century, stirring the hearts of those beyond the Jewish and Christian communities, leading to the fall of the Roman Empire and the spreading of Christian and Jewish communities to the farthest edges of the world. Again it changed the course of history. The Fourth Pentecost, occurring early in the 10th Century, created an uprising that split the Roman Catholic Church into Eastern and Western faiths in the 11th Century, once again changing history’s course. The Fifth Pentecost, occurring in the 15th Century – otherwise known as the Great Renaissance – led to the “battle royal” that we know now as the Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century.

If you are feeling a bit confused, exhausted, and anxious amidst all the social and political turmoil of our day, you may want to consider the fact that, in the 20th Century you lived through a new Pentecost-like awakening that makes the Renaissance look like child’s play.

Consider these facts, which I’ve mentioned before but are worth remembering: In the year 1900, the first patent on record in the New York City Patent Office was a paper clip. By the year 2000 we were cloning sheep! In 1900, astronomers believed that the Milky Way was the only galaxy in the universe. By the year 2000, we had launched a telescope into space and found there to be at least 100 billion galaxies.

It’s not just technology that blossomed in the 20th Century. In 1900, forced labor, or legalized slavery, was practiced in nearly 200 countries. In the year 2000, legalized

slavery was virtually non-existent. In 1900, approximately 40% of all children died before their fifth birthday. Now the number is 4%. In 1900, women had the right to vote in just one country. Now the number is nearly 200. In 1900, less than 200 scholarly articles were published per year. In 2016, 2,550,000 scholarly articles were published. In 1900, the share of adults (15+) with basic skills to read and write was about 20%. In 2016 it was 86%.

All these developments may not seem like the result of a Sixth Pentecost, but this is because we in the Western world hold this unproven assumption that there is a sharp division between the "sacred" and the "secular." We assume that an outpouring of the Holy Spirit results primarily in people devoting themselves to "spiritual" pursuits like prayer, reading the Bible, and forming new churches. Such things did happen in the 20th Century, actually, which resulted in the most dramatic growth in new churches and church attendance that our country has ever seen. We don't see it this way because the century ended with churches floundering and an exodus from many traditional communities of faith.

Yet an outpouring of the Holy Spirit is as likely to break up churches as it is to form new ones. Old wineskins tend to burst when new wine is poured in them. Old garments tend to split if patched with new cloth. And the Holy Spirit isn't the exclusive companion of Christians.

What is the difference between the Holy Spirit coming upon a person of faith such that they can lay hands on the sick and heal them, and the Holy Spirit tugging on the heart of a scientist or doctor – Christian, Jew, Hindu, or atheist – and filling them with new vision that leads to a cure for polio? Personally, I'd take the latter over the former if I had the choice!

If you were born at the beginning of the last century and lived until the end, you witnessed greater change than any person in human history ever witnessed before you. Some of these changes were, frankly, horrific – like the Holocaust and two World Wars. Yet wherever you turned, you also encountered technological innovation that relieved human suffering, and spiritual awakening that led people to devote their lives to taking down barriers that have traditionally divided us by gender, race, class, sexual orientation, country of origin and, yes, religion.

The old order was turned on its head right before our very eyes. Now, we live with the backlash as those who benefited from the divisions among us, and even the human suffering that kept people "in their place" and reliant on the old order for charitable assistance, are scrambling to maintain a system that is no longer tenable.

No, I wish someone in a time machine could come visit us here today to assure us that the mayhem and strife, the fracturing social and political systems, and even the crisis of faith that many are feeling, are not the result of something bad coming into our world and spreading, but something good that has come into our world, whose effects are finally deep enough to provoke a reaction.

But there is no one from the future here this morning, as far as I'm aware. So I guess we'll just have to rely on the Holy Spirit for our faith and assurance. And our vision of a new tomorrow.

How you live your life right now, right here, matters. It matters to you and your loved ones. It matters to generations to come, and it matters to the Holy Spirit.

What I see happening here on the Tri-Faith Commons is a movement of spirit that is bearing some of the early fruits of the new world that the Holy Spirit has been working for a century or more to bring about. We are the children of the Sixth Pentecost. So are the Muslims and Jews who join us here.

The great question that looms large for us in this place is, will we allow the world and its tumult to capture our imagination and keep us in bondage to a bygone world, or will we receive the Holy Spirit even more fully into our souls so that our vision sees farther than our fear and we become the new saints who help change the course of human history once again?