

“What Is the Gift?”
June 9, 2019

Acts 2:1-21

I imagine many of you have endured the embarrassing experience of having someone give you a gift, only to discover when you open the gift that you don't have a clue what it is or what you might use it for. There you are surrounded by a group of people. You're gathered around the Christmas tree with a bunch of family members. People are paying rapt attention to you because it's your birthday. The whole event revolves around you because it's a bridal shower or a baby shower.

With great excitement, someone hands you a gift in an impeccably wrapped box. You carefully untie the ribbon and you pull off the bow and the paper and a sense of anticipation fills the room with every eye focused on you. Then you open up the box and pull the thing out and there it is...

Is it a pencil sharpener or a spice grinder? Do you wear it as a scarf around your neck or blow your nose with it when you pull it out of your pocket or use it as a placemat on your dining room table? Is it a pair of earrings or is it a fancy key chain or is it actually a shiny fishing lure for catching bass on the nearby pond?

Of course, the person who gave you the gift is eagerly waiting for some kind of response. And sometimes that person comes right out with the logical question. “Well, how do you like it?” Meanwhile, you sit there staring at the item intently, looking at it from different angles as if you are admiring it, stalling and struggling to come up with just the right answer...appreciative and very polite but as vague as possible.

Then again, sometimes you go a little too far and you can't take it back. “Oh, how did you know I needed one of these? Thank you so much. I've been looking for a good meat thermometer to replace the one I lost a few holidays ago.” Whereupon the gift giver develops a crestfallen expression on his or her face. And the tone in their voice is a dead giveaway.

“What do you mean a meat thermometer? It's a tire pressure gauge. You keep it in your glove compartment and you stick it in your tire to see if it has enough air in it.”

Oh. Talk about killing the vibe in the room. It's hard to recover from that kind of embarrassment...

Pentecost comes with its own sense of uncertainty and mystery and perplexity. You heard the story a few moments ago. The leaders of the early church all gathered in one place when suddenly there was the sound of rushing wind, like a category four or five tornado. Tongues of fire appeared resting on every head. And each person gathered began to speak the Gospel in other languages.

There is no doubt Pentecost is a dramatic, significant story. And Pentecost is all about a gift God gives to the church. But when we take a closer look at the story, what exactly is the gift? And what is the gift for?

It's possible, I think, that the real gift of Pentecost is excitement. And inspiration. And energy. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit showed up with an attitude and put on a show. With the kind of wind that would literally blow your socks off. And a dazzling pyrotechnics display that would have made a Fourth of July fireworks finale look tame in comparison.

Then all kinds of people from different lands got up and preached in their own languages. The whole thing was such a spectacle that one of the bystanders began to heckle from the sidelines. "Check out all those people drunk on new wine!"

Maybe Pentecost was designed to stir people up. Or more accurately, shake people up. If the truth be told, the church could use some excitement, energy, inspiration. Time to get up and get going. Instead of getting bogged down in minutiae and politics and budgets and petty disagreements, wouldn't it be nice for the church to be lifted up and soaring like a flag snapping majestically in the breeze?

When you look at the beginning of the Book of Acts more closely, however, you will notice that Pentecost falls in between the story of an apostle who is chosen to replace Judas Iscariot and a story about the early church breaking bread and teaching the message of Jesus and taking care of the poor in their midst. The Pentecost story fits into a larger narrative of how the early church tried to deal with basic, every day, earthly realities. As a result, I don't think Pentecost intends to lift us up above those realities. Pentecost merely illuminates those realities.

If Pentecost was about some other gift, then maybe it was about the gift of power. If you hearken back to the words of Jesus speaking to the disciples, you can find a clue. "When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you shall receive power." Well, if power is the gift of Pentecost to the church, God knows the church can use some of that as well.

Then again, if power is the gift of Pentecost, the problem is that it may not be the kind of power that first comes to mind. Pentecost doesn't promise to give us ordinary power. The kind of power and clout and authority we might yearn for in a secular sense.

The power of Pentecost is a power that originates in Jesus Christ and the power Jesus wielded was power borne out of weakness and vulnerability. Remember what the hecklers on the Pentecost sideline shouted? "They look like they are all drunk to me!" Whatever kind of power may have been on display on Pentecost, it didn't look like power to the outsiders who looked on skeptically.

I think we can probably rule out "excitement, energy and inspiration" as the primary gifts of Pentecost. I think we can also put the notion of "power" on the back burner. The question is what's left. As we're looking at Pentecost from all different angles, trying to ascertain what it is and what it's all about, what is it that we're really looking at?

Here's a third option. It's a gift the church desperately needs. And not coincidentally, it's a gift the world desperately needs as well. The greatest gift of Pentecost is the gift of having something to say.

In the midst of the violence and the brokenness and the tragedy and the conflict that permeates our world, Pentecost reminds us that the church has something to say. "Your sons and daughters will prophesy," was how the prophet Joel put it. We have a word to share. Life is stronger than death. Hope is deeper than despair. One day God will wipe away the tears from our eyes. And in the power of the resurrected Christ, death and pain will be swallowed up and new life will take root. The church has a word to speak.

There's a story about Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross who was busy writing her seminal book on death and dying. As part of her writing, Kubler-Ross interviewed dying patients in a hospital to try and figure out how patients felt when they were facing death.

After a number of interviews, Kubler-Ross noticed a recurring pattern. Sometimes she would walk into a patient's room and the person would be calm and at peace. She also began to notice that patients were often tranquil after a particular orderly in the hospital had been cleaning their room.

So Dr. Kubler-Ross sought out the orderly and asked, "What are you doing with my patients?"

Feeling defensive, the orderly responded, "I'm not doing anything with your patients."

"No, no, whatever you're doing is a good thing. After you go into their rooms, they seem calm and peaceful."

"I just talk to them," the orderly admitted. "You know I've had two babies of my own die on my lap. But God never abandoned me. I tell them that. I tell them they aren't alone, that God is with them and that they don't have to be afraid."

That right there is the real gift of Pentecost. A unique word of good news and a faith-filled word of hope offered in a world filled with devastation and tragedy and destruction.

On that Pentecost day long ago, all those people gathered together in one spot found a voice. Together they found a way to glorify and give thanks to God. Everyone had a chance to speak. And everyone listened. And everyone understood the promise of God's good news.

That word, that speech, that power to give voice to the will of God is still needed today. And the church that found its footing on this Pentecost day long ago has the capacity to step up and speak it loudly and clearly here and now.

Just say the word and the Holy Spirit will take over from there. Amen.

