

Sermon, 11 May 2008—Pentecost
Tenth Anniversary of the Consecration of the New Building
Acts 2:1-11; Psalm 104; I Corinthians 12:1-11; John 20:19-23

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

On this day, the Feast of Pentecost, ten years ago, Bishop Jelinek consecrated this building for its use as a church. As with everything in the Easter Cycle, what matters is not the calendar date ten years ago, but the feast day, because the feast day gives the event its meaning.

Pentecost is the fiftieth day after Easter. On this Jewish holy day of obligation, devout Jews traveled to Jerusalem to give thanks for the gift of the Law on Sinai. On this day, Christians celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit in the upper room. It is the coming of age of the community gathered around Jesus, their commissioning into the continuity of Jesus' mission. They received the same power that he was given at his baptism to live out his vision of the Messianic reign. Jesus rose from the water dedicated to making God's promises actual in people's lives. I am not saying that Jesus took this on as a whim; I am saying that what happened to him in the Jordan River "tore the heavens open" for him, and he understood that this mattered more than anything else to which he might dedicate his life. In the same way, Jesus' followers, on this day, left the upper room where they had been gathering, first in fear after Jesus' crucifixion, then in hope and joy after his Resurrection, now dedicated by the gift of the Holy Spirit to making Jesus' fulfillment of God's promises actual in people's lives. In both cases, God's Spirit, poured out first on Jesus, then on his followers, was the activator, the catalyst, the charge; and in both cases, their empowerment was for the sake of the completion of God's purposes, not only to make God's mighty acts known as history, but as transformative power in the present.

Of course, this is exactly why Pentecost is the right day to consecrate a church building. Pentecost is the day on which the disciples found their voice and found their courage. Pentecost is the day on which the disciples realized that God's work, not their own, was what they were to be about. Pentecost is the day on which those who had been gathered in Jerusalem for the observance of the feast were astonished to hear that the mighty acts of God, which they thought were things to be commemorated, were actually things taking place in their own day. Your consecration of this building ten years ago on Pentecost was meant to remind you of all this, to call you into all this, to empower you for all this—all that Jesus' followers discovered.

First, as Jesus' followers did on Pentecost, find your voice and your courage. Sunday morning is meant to be nothing more than our gathering to give thanks. That is what Eucharist means: thanksgiving. What we are giving thanks for is everything that God is doing in our life on the other six days of the week. Dear friends, if you were to take on as a project that you will remember ONE THING that happened to you during the week for which you will give God thanks on Sunday, your life would begin to transform. Dear sisters and brothers, if you were to bring to church a list of six things, one a day, that happened in the past week for which you want to give thanks to God, you would find your voice and you would find your courage. What would our prayers become if we paused to say out loud the six things we are thankful for and went around the room! You would find your voice and your courage, because true core gratitude longs to express itself, and conviction that we have things to be grateful for gives us courage, since we know we are already cared for. It would change the way you live.

Second, as Jesus' followers did on Pentecost, realize that God's work is what you are to be about. Now when I suggested that you look for six things to

say out loud that you are grateful for, some of you might have rolled your soul's eyes or heaved a spiritual sigh. If my recommendation seems fantastic, it might be because most of us have very little reason to see that on six days last week we got what we want and things went our way. The deadliest trick of the devil is to agree with you and encourage you to believe that everything, even religion, ought to be about you: how you succeed, how you act, how you feel. Didn't Jesus come to save *you*? Doesn't God love *you*? Isn't that proof that God wants it all to be about your health, your prosperity, your satisfaction, your salvation? So shouldn't church, then, be a kind of spiritual spa or our soul's repair shop, to make sure we feel restored to good running order for the week?

The answer is no. The answer is no, not because we all realize that having eight servings of dessert instead of supper is not a good plan. (On Mother's Day, it is good to be grateful for that and other useful insights.) The answer is no because religion is ultimately not about the strategies of our ego, its fantasies and desires and fears. We have all been seduced by the consumerism of our secular and commercial age, so we believe self-care is our goal. Below that artificial perspective is the reality that every one of us is hard-wired for survival, so it is hard for us to set our self aside. But even given that truth, know that you will never be happy if your own happiness is what you want. That is one of the inexorable spiritual laws: die to live. No great spiritual teacher suggests you die simply to die; all are clear that what looks like death to the grain of wheat is the only way for that grain to remain alive by multiplying its life into new grains. This is a spiritual truth: the death of self-centeredness is the discovery of a new world.

Jesus and his followers both discovered that God's work is what they were to be about. That, dear friends, makes the search for the ONE THING that you are grateful for easy, because it is a search for any strand of evidence that

God was active in you today. If nothing else, God's initial impulse of creation held good for another day: God held you in life. On a good day, God's work of restoration and healing and reconciliation and forgiveness is known to us directly, and we feel that we have been brought into a better relationship with the world. On our best days, God's work of restoration and healing and reconciliation and forgiveness continue *through us*, and we see that we have become agents of that work, that we have assisted God in bringing the world into a better relationship, a more sustainable harmony, a deeper and more reliable sense of hope. If we had one of those experiences each day of the week, we would have constant reasons to gather for gratitude on Sunday morning.

Of course, this is also true of us as a congregation. We do not have to invent what St. John's Church has gathered to do. We do not have to discover why this building was built. We only need to become more and more adept at recognizing what God is doing among us, giving thanks for it, and cultivating it, encouraging it, fostering it, equipping it. Then we as a community know what we are giving thanks for each Sunday: first for the Resurrection of Christ, but second for all the good things that God is doing for us and through us.

That leads easily into the third wonder of Pentecost. Those who were startled by the uproar in the upper room told these hot-wired and fully loaded disciples that they heard them speaking of God's deeds of power, each in their own native language. In other words, once we have found voice and courage to give thanks for our share in God's mighty acts, then we do not need to limit that to Sunday morning; in fact, we will be hard put to limit it to Sunday. Once we truly are being transformed, we will easily and naturally talk about it, because we will be tired of our former games and no longer able to keep up our evasions; in fact, our friends are likely to comment on it and ask us about it.

Once we have begun that conversation, invitation to others to join in is not hard; in fact, we will want for our friends what we have found so vital for ourselves, and they will want what we have.

Notice that those who responded to Peter's preaching on Pentecost were not the Jewish unchurched of their day, but the devout. These were men who had made the trip to Jerusalem from all around the Mediterranean basin in order to be faithful to the injunctions of their religion. They were not looking for something else. It is not surprising that they recognized what was going on with the disciples. They would be the very ones most ready to recognize what is being talked about and long for it. The history of the church, of course, is one of continuously expanding circles of conversation, from Jerusalem, to Samaria, to Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome, to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Those circles exist in every local community as well. An amazing thing, when we hosted the showing of the film "For The Bible Tells Me So," was the standing-room-only crowd that came to this building and filled our parish hall: some were indistinguishable from what you see sitting around you today, and some were decorated in ways not ordinarily seen on Sunday morning, but all of them, whether they knew it or not, were eager to hear and to acclaim the mighty acts of God. I was touched to hear that our co-host—Peace United Church of Christ—has a long history of friendship with our congregation, a partnership that lapsed when we moved to this location. We used to share a Thanksgiving service with them every year, alternating buildings. When our former church building burned, they offered us their worship space for our use—and even offered to adjust their Sunday schedule so we could use their building. Our partners in mission are waiting for us! An equally wonderful thing was the energy the showing of this film released in you: an enthusiasm and conviction and sense of purpose. Several of you said to me, "that's why we built this

place.” Amen to that; may we always be so quick to respond to human hunger for justice and relief and the knowledge of God and to put this building to the uses for which it was built.

Beyond our location here, because we are members of a diocese, we have partners as well. The Diocesan Mission Strategy Network is exploring how to link the congregations in the cities surrounding the metro area that have parishes: Duluth, Mankato, Rochester, and Saint Cloud, so we can share strategies and ideas for mission. What a difference it would make if we looked at our life not as an only child, but as one of several siblings who support each other in becoming the best that each can be, recommending things to each other, praying for each other, offering support and advice in each other’s sorrows, and celebrating each other’s joys. We also have access, through national church structures, to social ministry across the entire globe, so we do not need to wring our hands with horror at the devastation in Myanmar, but can join other Episcopalians who are sending relief by participating in the efforts of Episcopal Relief and Development.

So we are stepping into our next ten years—our next twenty, fifty, one hundred, one hundred and fifty years.... The principles of Pentecost will continue to apply; they will continue to be the reason this building was built and consecrated. What remains is simply to see how we can make them true in our life as a congregation: how we can find our voice and our courage, how we can realize that God’s work is what we are about, and how we can encourage our neighbors and friends to see that that God’s mighty acts are not things of the past, but of the present, where God is always active, whom, as Eternal Source, Only-begotten Word, and Life-giving Spirit, One God, we praise today in this building and hope to praise in the eternal structures of the new Jerusalem forever.