

Confirmation Sunday: Day of Pentecost

“From Divided to United”

Sermon Text: Acts 2:1-21

Day of Pentecost

FUMC, Arlington, TX 76011

15 May 2016

“The inner fire is the most important thing humankind possesses”

(Edith Sodergran).

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Today our church confirms a group of youngsters into full church membership. Confirmation is a yearlong process that includes experiences and “book learning.” Although many confirmands think of confirmation as an end, in reality confirmation is a beginning of a process of lifelong learning. Bona fide Christians learn all their days. In fact, our church has many Bible studies to help believers move to a deeper understanding of their relationship with God no matter how long they have been Christians. Never forget too that the Holy Spirit helps us interpret the Bible.

Lifelong learning is the model for people who have great knowledge and want to develop wisdom. Those who possess knowledge learn from everything around them: other people, books, nature, psychology, art, literature, magazines, film, and the Bible. No one knows the Bible too well. Those who continue learning are people who make knowledge portable and useful. Hear the day’s lesson:

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” 13 But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

17 ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. 19 And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. 20 The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”

Over the last several decades, Mainline—Old-Line Protestantism has suffered one indignity after another. Some pundits suggest newer generations have little tolerance for anything that they did not themselves create. Others suggest that our world has moved beyond the church’s vision—we need new ideas/answers. Old answers/ideas don’t seem to work anymore. Some say the secular religion has achieved the prophecy of 19th and 20th century philosophers. Some say “the big three,” Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud have done-in the church with radical and novel ideas that have shaken the confidence that Christians once had in their world view.

As you might guess, I consider our Bible an important friend as we make our faith journey. To study scripture is to learn who God is and who we are as God’s children. Yet, looking carefully at conflict over public policy—take your choice of abortion, capital punishment, same-gender marriage, conservation of natural resources, military preparedness—discord among Christians is a fundamental detail. That detail would be in the interpretation of Holy Scripture. The way we read the Bible has a lot to do with how we understand the way(s) God works in our world.

This problem of interpretation goes beyond biblical literacy. It goes to how we look at Scripture itself. It is a problem that cuts two ways, in that both so-called liberals and so-called conservatives each have blind spots regarding scripture. Conservatives tend to know the Bible’s content, but now and again stumble when trying to apply it to modern situations that appear on the cultural horizon at inconvenient moments in history. Similarly, liberals think they can apply Scripture to modern problems. The trouble with liberals is that they have not made time nor extended an effort to discover exactly what the Bible says. Thus, one side knows the Bible, but

does not seem to understand culture; the other side knows culture, but fails to know the Bible.

Today, for those interested in such things, I want to give our confirmands a short lesson on how to best read the entire Bible. In addition I invite them to know both its content and meaning. I invite the rest of you here today to listen in.

To begin, let us shred a time-honored way of Bible reading. Some folks try to read the complete Bible straight through beginning with Genesis—like one might read a novel. Old timers could read the Bible this way and I have met many of them. Some had no television. Or, perhaps, they were farmers shut up long months in the cold dreary winter. They had a lot of time on their hands.

Yet people today do not have the resolve to read the Bible straight through. Even if read with the best of intentions, somewhere along Exodus 20-25 (laws concerning, among other things, slaves, violence, property, restitution, social and religious laws, annual festivals, the tabernacle—its dimensions, of what it should be constructed, how it was to be constructed and the like—you get the idea) most people think instead “I may wait for the movie.” The earnest make it to Leviticus 10.

Years ago I read of John R. Stott’s method to read the Bible and I recommend Dr. Stott’s methodology today. According to Dr. Stott we can divide the Bible into quarter sections. If one reads four chapters a day beginning in each of four locations, then in one year a person can read the entire Bible. It might not be a bad New Year’s Resolution if today were not 15 May. The places to begin are with the books of Genesis, Ezra, Matthew, and Acts. These places in the Bible are crucial—and no one will be surprised. Genesis tells creation’s story—God’s part and people’s place. Ezra tells the story of a disheartened nation of Israel back from exile and in despair. Suddenly, someone rediscovers the law and the nation begins to rebuild. Matthew tells the story of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Acts recounts how the early church overcomes obstacles to create a vehicle to proclaim God’s holy word.

Genesis = human origins
Ezra = rediscovering the holy law
Matthew = an introduction to our savior
Acts = A New Genesis = the birth of the church = the reception of the Holy Spirit

No one can make you read the Bible, but it is the Bible that makes Christians. John Burgess, wrote the book titled *Why Scripture Matters: Reading the Bible in a Time of Church Conflict*. He once asked his young daughters why they thought the Bible mattered. He wrote, “Hannah looked at me quizzically and replied, ‘But Daddy, how else will you know who Jesus is?’” (John P Burgess, *Why Scripture Matters: Reading the Bible in a Time of Church Conflict*. Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 1998, p. XI).

Not such a bad question from a child or an adult either.

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