

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, our risen Lord and Savior.

Today is Pentecost. First, Pentecost is one of only two Sundays where the liturgical color is red. The other Sunday is Reformation in October. Pentecost is grouped with the Sundays of Easter. Second, it is one of two Sundays with unique liturgical colors that exist between Easter and the Time after Pentecost, that long season of green. That other in-between Sunday is Holy Trinity Sunday which just happens to be next week.

I was asked this week what Pentecost was: "is that when the dove came down and landed on Jesus' head accompanied by the pleased voice of God? No wait, that was Jesus' baptism right?" So, I said that we think of Pentecost as when the wind and fire of the Holy Spirit touched each of the disciples and they spoke, not in tongues, but in common, recognizable languages that were not their own. Now that is a true statement but it is also a very incomplete definition. Pentecost, you see, occurs on the fiftieth day after Easter which coincides with the Jewish Festival of the Weeks also known as the Shavuot which also occurs fifty days after the passover. Funny how that worked out.

Actually, it is not funny because it is just another example of the significant connection of the New Testament to the Old Testament. You may have heard that seven is a blessed number in the Old Testament which is accurate but seven is not the only such number, fifty is also. In fact, there is a whole system of rest and forgiveness built around factors of seven and around fifty. On the seventh day of creation – God rested. Seven weeks after the celebrating the Passover is the festival of weeks - or more correctly stated it is the festival of seven weeks or seven – sevens. The same thing happens in years which culminates in what is known as the Jubilee year, beginning the day after seven times seven years or forty-nine years. The Jubilee is like a reset button. Everything that happened in those forty-nine years is reversed – debt, sales, and so on - and, in fact, even the land is allowed to rest in that fiftieth year of the Jubilee. For Christians, Pentecost is essentially a reset button for us with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Since I am headed in another direction soon, here are several quick thoughts on our Gospel reading from John and our first reading from Acts. First, they take place essentially 50 days apart. Second, in the gospel reading Jesus breathes on them and in Acts the wind and flames descend and touch on them. Finally, nowhere is there any indication that they actually asked for or accepted the Spirit.

Now, you all know much better than I do, how in the Hawaiian language the different combinations of letters and tick marks create different pronunciations and sounds and maybe even meanings. The same is true in Greek and even more so in

Aramaic. You can, in fact, construct an entire English sentence using one Greek word with different prefixes and suffixes. The greatest difficulty for translators is determining which pieces in a Greek sentence are nouns, which pieces are verbs, which pieces are adjectives or adverbs, and so on. We will get more on this context next week.

Now, my wife, Nanette, tells a story from our late 70s college days. But, if you want the whole accurate story you'll have to ask her because as a typical guy I only heard and remember parts of the story. In the story she says she remembers sitting next to an older lady in a church service who was losing her eyesight. In preparing for blindness, she was memorizing all the verses of all the hymns in the hymnal. She was amazing but Nanette said she noticed the lady would not sing some verses so Nanette asked her why. The lady responded that some verses of some hymns contain theology that she does not agree with so she refuses to sing those verses. So, here is the question: do you or have you ever paid close enough attention to the words in the hymns we sing to identify concepts of theology that you may or may not agree with? I guess I did not for a long time but I have become more and more sensitive to this recently.

To demonstrate this idea I have selected five hymns or songs for us to consider. First, I must point out that only two of five songs are actually in the ELW, Evangelical Lutheran Hymnal, we use. Second, we have a series of graphics displaying two verses of each of these hymns. Third, they are technically listed in alphabetical order but I will also admit that the last one leads into next week's homily. Finally, the point of this exercise is to focus on what or who is the focus and what or who is doing the action.

The first one is ALL TO JESUS I SURRENDER. In this one, I see the focus on and action coming from ourselves. This was Martin Luther's problem, this was my problem, this was the problem for so many of my friends. It is our nature, we want to earn our salvation but that is not how it works.

The second one is HAVE THINE OWN WAY LORD. The focus is on what God is and can do for and to us.

The third one is in the ELW and it is JESUS COME FOR WE INVITE YOU. The question is, who is doing the inviting? Us? This kind of reminds me of the old cliché about Jesus standing at the door and knocking? Is that logical? Is it realistic? Do we actually see examples of this happening in the New Testament? We actually more often see Jesus just going through doors without unlocking them.

This fourth song is once again all about us and our actions. It is such a great song to sing but in reality, it has horribly faulty theology. Welcome to JUST I AM WITHOUT ONE PLEA.

And finally, THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THAT NAME. What name? Jesus? After all, Jesus and its similar derivatives are pretty common and always have been. Jesus like Joshua means savior or more precisely that God rescues, or delivers, or saves. So, again, I ask the question – is the important name Jesus? Or is the important name "I AM"? Jesus did, after all, lay claim to the right to use "I AM" and I believe - rightly so.

The theological focus of these songs and much church music, in general, is contingent upon the perspective of the writer mostly relative to the concepts of law and grace. Martin Luther spoke about this in his Augsburg Confessions when he said: "The anabaptists denied the priority of God's action through the sacrament and made the administration of the sacraments dependent on the condition of faith thus baptism was changed from a sign and an assurance of God's promise to a sign of man's faith, and consequently lost its significance for salvation. They speak about faith, but they actually emphasize human activity and work."

We have actually seen these exact words and even this exact story from the perspective of the other gospels over the last several months. But the pairing of this gospel reading with the reading from Acts poses a big theological question. Why did the disciples receive or require two separate acts to be filled with the Spirit? For the record, I believe they were filled with the Spirit by Jesus in the gospel reading and that the Spirit made a big scene in the Acts reading to get the world's attention. The Spirit comes and fills us in many different ways – in a football stadium listening to Billy Graham, in a college auditorium listening to others talk about God in their lives, in soup kitchens and thrift stores, church worship and Bible studies and in the cabs of military vehicles and in foxholes in times of war.

Hear then the good news:

John was not written for our information or to help us understand.

John was not written to affirm or build up our theology.

John was written so that we may believe.

Belief is not about solid creeds or correct confessions, belief is about being in relationship with God and with others.

Division, disorientation, misuse of power, etc. seem to have the upper hand in today's world, but it is nothing new, it has always been the nature of man to abuse power.

Relationship does not require or use power, relationship is built upon service.

Amen