

The Rev. Eric O. Springsted, Ph.D.
Rye Presbyterian Church
May 27, 2012

This Is What We Came For

Text: St. John 16:4-15

A couple of years ago, our daughters gave us for Christmas a set of tickets to a Bruce Springsteen concert. It was *great*, and I walked out of that concert afterwards a better man. That was due to the music, but, to my mind, what was also very good was that, although I hadn't been to a rock concert since sometime in the mid-1970s, I didn't even feel out of place, as it appeared that everybody there was about our age – including Bruce himself. So I was absolutely delighted that all these people were still rocking after all these years, and that Bruce was, too.

Another thing that delighted me about the evening was that Bruce came directly onto the stage and pitched right into his set. There was no warm up band, something which always seems somewhat pointless and which always seems to distract from the main event, besides the fact that it is usually something second rate. While I have heard rumors of warm up bands that went on to become great headliner acts themselves in due time, the fact of the matter is that no prime time band wants its warm up band to be very good or even to show a lot of promise, because if it does it may then distract from the main event. At best, a warm up band should get the audience to yearn for that which is to come. I suspect, therefore, that promoters think that one of the ways to make the crowd hungry is to make sure that the warm up band isn't very good or that it isn't even very much like the main event. I feel confirmed in this suspicion because the one warm up act that I actually do remember from forty years ago was memorable simply because it was so out of place. The group was a family that sang Gospel music together, and they were the warm up for a concert by Jim Morrison and the Doors. Jim had just been arrested the week before for

bawdy behavior in Miami. In their own right and in the right place, namely, a church, this warm up group was probably good enough; playing to the fans of the Doors was simply weird. They weren't what we came for. We came for the main event. When we bought tickets for Springsteen or Jim Morrison, it was Springsteen or Jim Morrison that we came for, and it was Springsteen or Jim Morrison who alone was going to make or break the evening.

What I would like to suggest on this Pentecost Sunday, is that Pentecost and what it means is what we come for in the church. Pentecost is what the people of God had been looking forward to since the time of the prophets, and it is what makes the Christian life. Now, in saying that, I do not mean to suggest that Christmas, or Good Friday or Easter, are simply forgettable warm up events leading up to Pentecost. But what I do want all of us to understand is that without the event we celebrate today, all the other scenes in the history of salvation would be forgotten, or, at least, they wouldn't really make any difference to us. And I also want us to understand that what we do today is no warm up to the rest of the week, either.

Think first about what goes on in the history of salvation. In the Incarnation, which we celebrate at Christmas, Christ came to share our lot; in his life he taught us the way to go; he was, as the letter to the Hebrews put it, the "pioneer of our faith." In his passion and death, he overcame the powers of sin and death that alienated us from God and life. In the Resurrection, a new world was born, one that was different from the old one. At the Ascension, he rose to heaven and reigns in power, interceding for us with God the Father. But for any or all of those events in the history of salvation to take effect *in us*, something still has to happen inside us; something has to change in our thinking, something has to change in our willing, and something has to change in our way of being. Until something does change inside us, until we have received the power to change, until we have received God's Spirit, all that God has done for us

will remain outside us.

The point is an obvious one. As the Buddha once said: “One who recites many teachings, but, being negligent, doesn’t act on them, is like a cowherd counting other people’s cows.” As the advertisement might say, don’t be a cowherd counting other people’s cows.

Or consider the case of forgiveness. Consider what happens with any number of people who are acquitted of crime, or are forgiven something they have done wrong, whether the forgiveness is divine or human. Plenty of people are forgiven, or acquitted, or within the legal system have paid the necessary penalty for whatever they might have done wrong. But plenty of people thus acquitted and forgiven are recidivists, too. Mere forgiveness by itself does not change them, unless somehow they take it to heart. If they do, however, everything merciful and just that has been done for them can then become theirs. But it never does become theirs until they take it to heart.

The great Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, Paul Tillich, once brilliantly described what God’s forgiveness means to a human being. It means, he said, simply that you are accepted. It means that everything in you that alienated you from God, and that might have made you guilty and ashamed was overcome. Why? Because God had purely and simply accepted you; you don’t have to do anything about it; you can’t earn this acceptance, it is given to you as a free gift. Now, Tillich went on to suggest, quite simply and logically, that therefore faith, living faith, is really a matter of accepting the fact that you are accepted. It is indeed, that simple. But in saying something so simple, Tillich also addressed the truly profound fact that being accepted isn’t going to do much good if you can’t accept the fact that you are accepted. The fact of salvation’s history working to accept you isn’t going to do much good without the faith that accepts that history. It isn’t going to do you much good to be loved if you are unloving or if the

dominating spirit of your life is self deprecation, or meanness, or selfishness, or simply accepting the “good enough,” or if you think that the nice is the same thing as the good. What needs to happen is that the spirit of your life has to let God’s acceptance into your life. Your spirit has to be moved by the Spirit. When that happens, you can then see yourself truly as a child of God, and you can then see others that way, too. It means that you really do become a part of God’s life.

As far back as the prophets, God had continually promised to change the way that things were done in Israel. Back as far as the Exodus, God had insisted that his people be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, but as everybody knows the people usually were anything but a holy nation. God knew that, too. So in order to make holiness happen, God determined that fulfilling this expectation wouldn’t just be left up to the people. Just telling them what he wanted of them, just giving them the Law and expecting them to do it, God knew wasn’t going to change much of anything, except to make them more guilty. Therefore God promised that he would also give them God’s own spirit to lead them. That is why Jeremiah prophesied that God would make a new covenant, a new testament with Israel and Judah, one that could not be broken, one where, God says, “I will put my law *within* them, and I will write it on their hearts... and they shall all know me.” Ezekiel prophesied that God would give the people “one heart, and put a new spirit within them...and then they shall be my people and I will be their God.” Joel prophesied: “I will pour my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions...and in those days I will pour out my spirit.” And Isaiah prophesied that with the giving of God’s spirit would come the gifts of the Spirit, the gifts that mark a holy people: wisdom, understanding, counsel, courage, knowledge, piety, and the fear of the Lord

What we celebrate today on Pentecost is the fulfillment of that prophecy. What does that fulfillment mean to us? It means simply that we can now take to heart what is expected of us, and what has been done for us. It means we can live what we say. It means, for example, that we don't have to simply surround ourselves with the writings of truth – on our walls or in the books we display in the front and read from, but that we can now make the truth our own. It means when we say that one is to love God with all of one's heart, mind and soul, that we mean it, and we love like that. What the fulfillment of that prophecy then means is that God's Spirit has now been given to us and that we now should start looking like the holy people God wanted from the beginning.

When Jesus promised the disciples that he would send the Spirit of truth to them after he had gone, he said he would do so, so that when the Spirit comes, "it will guide you into all truth." Being guided into the truth is important, for there is a big difference between just having the truth and actually living the truth; or as James wrote, there is a big difference between being a hearer of the Word, and being a doer of it. Without the Spirit that guides us into the truth, we still remain foreigners and strangers to the truth. Without the Spirit that guides us into the truth, we might talk a lot about the truth, but are not very likely to walk in the truth. As Calvin boldly pointed out, until the Spirit moves us to hear them and take them to heart, Jesus' own teachings are worthless.

That is precisely why today, Pentecost, the day that we celebrate the giving of the Holy Spirit is so important. That is why today is what we came for. For without the gift of the Spirit, everything of God's would simply remain outside us and foreign to us. Without the gift of the Spirit, we as a church might be a benevolent society or a nice group of friends, but we wouldn't be a church. Without the gift of the Spirit, baptism might symbolize washing and cleansing, but

it wouldn't be a matter of grafting us into Christ himself, making us real sisters and brothers of Christ, and children of the Father. Without the gift of the Spirit, communion might symbolize the Last Supper or Christ's death or even a wish for unity amongst ourselves, but it wouldn't be Christ's presence to us here, to make us his own. Without the gift of the Spirit, Jesus might be a philosopher to us, but we wouldn't have the gifts of the Spirit that he promised, the spiritual gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel, courage, knowledge, piety, and the fear of the Lord that indicate that God is in our lives, and we are in God's life. But with the gift of the Spirit, this is a church, we really are children of God, and Christ really gives us himself as spiritual food that we might grow into him. With the gift of the Spirit, we have the gifts of the Spirit, and God has us, and we have God.

But let us understand then that for all that to happen, we have to know that this is what we came for, and that this is the main event. What we do this morning is not a warm up for the rest of the week. No matter how important your job, it is not more important than what we do here. What we do here is not and cannot be what is in tenth or twelfth or even second place in our lives. It has to be what is in first place. For what we do this morning is not to get us excited about something that comes later that is more important and more interesting. For we come here this morning, and every Sunday morning, not to feel better about ourselves or others, it is not even to hear about the truth; it is to be led into all truth. It is to be claimed by the truth and to live truthfully always. There is nothing more important than that, for life, real life, eternal life, depends on it.