

# “Even Greater Works than These”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – June 5, 2022*

Pentecost Sunday

Romans 8:22-27

Rev Dr. John Wahl

John 14:11-17

Today, the Christian church celebrates Pentecost – fifty days (or seven Sundays) after Easter. The story of the first Pentecost is found in chapter two of the book of Acts, when the Spirit descends in power upon the people gathered in Jerusalem. This is often remembered as the birthday of the church: when a great wind comes down from the skies and fire appears above the heads of the disciples, and all are able to hear God’s word in their own language. Everyone; all people.<sup>1</sup>

The story of Pentecost also shares two things that are common among graduations: it’s both a memorable event and a new beginning. This coming of the Holy Spirit – which Jesus in John calls the *Paraclete* – provides an important marker for the life of God’s people, as well as the start of something different: a new phase. From this point forward, any gathering of Christ’s followers – whenever two or more come together in his name – means the re-creation of his own body. Though Jesus is not physically present – for the relatively brief moment of incarnation has passed – he remains as the head of this body. We are thus, using Paul’s language, each members: functioning as Christ’s eyes and ears, his hands and feet.

In this passage from John, where Jesus is speaking to his disciples before his death, he promises that the Father will send them another Companion. In other translations, the Greek word *Paraclete* is called the Advocate, Comforter, or Helper. What is important to note is that Jesus calls the Holy Spirit “another” Companion; not the first. Whenever we wonder what this Spirit is like, we need only remember who Jesus was. Jesus and the Holy Spirit both come from God and are sent to the world. Both of them teach, heal and reveal the truth. Both inspire us to compassion and give us courage. They function in the same way.

Thus, Jesus is able to say to the disciples, here, that when the Spirit comes, they will be able to continue to do the works of Jesus; in fact, to do even greater

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Butler Bass, “Sunday Musings” from *The Cottage*

things. While Jesus walked the earth, his ministry was limited to one locale and one person. Upon his departure, his disciples are given the Spirit and moved from apprentices to full revealers of God's love. And this happens not just to the first disciples, but to all who would come later; even those who never saw, heard, or knew the incarnated, historical Jesus. John insists that present believers hold no disadvantage in comparison to the first believers. Everything they were taught and experienced is available to the same degree and with equal richness and power.<sup>2</sup>

When we look at the works of the church – over its, now, two-thousand year history – we can point to some amazing accomplishments. It is responsible for the founding of many schools and hospitals. It has welcomed countless refugees and immigrants and been a leader in some of the greatest social justice movements. With today's Pentecost special offering, we celebrate the various life-changing ways the church impacts children, youth, and young adults locally and around the world.

And yet, many of us wonder about the role of the church in today's world and moving into the future. In our country, the church has always enjoyed a prominent place in the public square. Our cities and towns literally grew up around churches. In many communities, though, churches are no longer at the center. Participation among all denominations and generations is down; especially over the past two years. Many have closed or have become wrapped up in scandal: from clergy abuse to financial malfeasance to theological schism. This has created a great deal of internal anxiety about the present and future voice and influence of the church.

Are "greater works than these" in the church's future? This Pentecost Sunday – as with every year the church celebrates its birthday – we must look both back and ahead. Remember how, on that first Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples, some of the people witnessing that event were skeptical; *are these people drunk?* they asked. It must have been a chaotic scene: people who had traveled to Jerusalem from all different parts of the ancient world each hearing God's word spoken in their own language; the Spirit's wind rushing through all of them, no matter who they were or from where they came.

In many parts of what we call the developing world, the Christian church is experiencing rapid growth. A lack of clergy has meant that new leaders are being

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<sup>2</sup> Jamie Clark-Soles from *WorkingPreacher.com*

identified and trained in new ways. The Western, so-called developed world is now taking notice, learning from, and forging relationships with these church partners. Around the globe, eyes are being opened to issues of economic, climate, health, and food justice. The church no longer stands only in the town square, but on the global stage.

For the graduates in our congregation and beyond that we honor today, this moment truly is a new beginning. They are founding members of a new digital world, where it is possible to be – unlike those of us from previous (older) generations – fully part of a global community. Still, their lives will be indelibly influenced by the decisions we make now: how will immigrants be treated, what will we do about the proliferation of guns, will technology and social media companies be regulated, how much warmer will we allow the planet to grow?

We might not want to think about these types of questions; they may seem too scary or complex to contemplate. But the church, the body of Christ – as a part of the global community of faith – has an important voice to lend to these decisions. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit – God’s Companion for compassion, justice, and love – the church can speak for the unheard, can advocate for the voiceless, and can give power to the forgotten ones. I have great hope that these young people – who have recently or soon will be graduating, willing and able as they are to participate in a global community – will bring about an inclusivity that this world has never before seen. Everyone; all people.

In the story of that first Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down upon all people. Not just upon the rich or religiously devout; not just on those who were adult, male or straight; upon all people. These were the people of God. When we come to the communion table this morning, we are reminded that God prepares this feast of remembrance for everyone; all people. Not just for those who are members of this particular church or denomination, not just those known to us or considered to be in good standing. The Lord’s Table is open to everyone. All people are invited.

And maybe, this is the place – on this particular Pentecost Sunday – where we can again participate in “even greater works than these.” For, when we know that we have been invited, when we know that at place has been set for us, we can extend the same hospitality to others. They may not be willing or able to come to this particular table – because of physical, social, or emotional distance – but let’s consider what gift might we have to offer to them. Could we provide to a young

person a chance to learn – like the support we are giving to summer campers at the Chagrin Falls Park Community Center? Will we choose to become advocates for clean energy or school funding or voting rights? Could we “Pass On” something that we’re no longer using – a book, a desk, or a coat – that might help someone else? Or, can we offer some opportunity for inclusion or simply an encouraging word?

The church – and its people – have accomplished much. But, in its best moments, it does so by understanding that the Holy Spirit has and continues to inform and inspire all its efforts. In our day, and with humility, we acknowledge that the church no longer holds the same standing as it has previously; our world is changing. But in Christ, we are a new creation; a re-creation of his own body, and each of us members of it. Let this Pentecost therefore be a moment to celebrate, but also a beginning; the starting point for what the Holy Spirit is informing and inspiring us to truly become. Amen.