

West Charlton United Presbyterian Church
1331 Sacandaga Road, Amsterdam, NY 12010



The Beacon

June, 2011

WEST CHARLTON UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH 882-9874 www.westcharltonupc.org



Pentecost: Witnessing to the Holy Spirit Then and Now

In a time when we struggle to understand the meaning of the church and its ministry, an understanding of Pentecost and its call to be witnesses can enlighten and clarify our church's sense of identity and mission. We also need to realize that it was the power of God that descended on Pentecost to equip the church; it was not the talents, skills, or experiences of the men and women of the upper room that birthed the church.

Along with Christmas and Easter, Pentecost recognizes a major milestone in the Christian story. It was on that Day, fifty days after the resurrection of Christ that the church was born through the fire of the Holy Spirit. There was a Hebrew Celebration long before Pentecost observed by the Israelites as a harvest festival. The feast began on the fiftieth day after the first day of Passover. Originally called Feast of Weeks or Shavuot, it was the occasion to give thanks for the first fruits of the harvest. Over the centuries the meaning evolved from its agrarian focus and became a celebration of God's gift of the Torah on Mount Sinai. The Jewish Shavuot lasts two days and involves several distinct practices. It is common on the first night to stay up all night reading the Torah and to gather early in the morning to pray. As on the Sabbath, there is to be no work on Shavuot. At least one dairy meal is eaten, and the biblical readings are from the book of Ruth. David the king is said to have died on Shavuot and was the ancestor of Ruth leading to this tradition.

On that first Pentecost following the resurrection of Jesus, Jewish believers from all the lands around the Mediterranean had come to Jerusalem for the celebration of this important Jewish festival. The men and women who had followed Jesus were gathered still in the upper room. Since they were worshiping Jews, it is probably safe to assume that they had been up all night reading the Torah and had gathered early to pray. These men and women were first of all Jews. They still practiced the traditions of their faith, observed its holy days, and obeyed the torah. Second, they had been disciples of the man called Jesus and believed him to be the Messiah. During the last fifty days, their lives had been turned upside down. Now they were unsure what they were to do. They were both confused and expectant. After the resurrection, we are told that Jesus spent forty days appearing occasionally and instructed the apostles not to leave Jerusalem. God will send you the baptism of the Holy Spirit, he told them. Confused, they wanted to know when he would restore the earthly kingdom of Israel. This, Jesus said, is not something you need to know (Acts 1:1-8).

Jesus rose into the heavens after he spoke his final words to them: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Still confused, they went back to Jerusalem to wait. They had no idea when the Spirit would come, how it would come, or what it would mean to have power to witness. Now it was Pentecost. Suddenly the upper room was filled with a rush of sound and motion, wind, fire, tongues. The men and women burst from the house into the street, full of stories about Jesus. Those who were gathered from all over the world—and across time— were stunned and amazed. Most understood the words the men and women were saying; many wondered what had happened; some figured they were drunk. In such a cacophony, the church of Jesus Christ was born!

It is not possible to fully understand the account of the first Christian Pentecost and to ask what it means for the church today without putting the story into the context of both Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts. These books together constitute a single narrative bound together by a common purpose. Each addressed to "most excellent Theophilus," they are the story of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and the emergence of his church.

Luke announces in the beginning of his Gospel his desire to write "an orderly account" of what has happened (Luke 1:1–4). What he writes is a mixture of history, story, and theology. Since Luke's goal is not history but a theological story, we must read with our eyes open to what Luke has to say about God and God's actions through Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Luke and Acts are firmly rooted in the salvation history of Israel. The author deeply believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promise to redeem Israel through the coming of a messiah. He makes clear in Acts that the purpose of the church is to declare that reality to all the peoples of the earth.

Luke's theological perspective is consistent through both Luke and Acts. First of all, God is a maker and keeper of promises. God promised Israel that a messiah would come and would bring them salvation. Luke maintains that in Jesus Christ this promise of God was fulfilled and completed. As we look through Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14–36) we see this affirmation again and again. He begins with words of promise from the prophet Joel and goes on to quote from Psalms. God made a promise and in Jesus the promise was fulfilled. The second thing Luke wants us to know about God is that God is the central player in this story of Pentecost.

Nothing that the men and women of the upper room did brought about the coming of the Spirit. It was God's time and God's way. In every way God was the initiator, the planner, the starring actor. The power of God descended on Pentecost to equip the church; it was not the talents, skills, or experiences of the men and women of the upper room that birthed the church.

Theologians often refer to this combination of story, history, and theology found in Luke's writing and in other books of the Bible as kerygma. Kerygma is the inspired telling of the story that reaches beyond words on the page to become the living Word of God. It is this, says William Willimon that "unleashes the power of the resurrected Christ so that the gap between the earthly Jesus and the resurrected Lord is bridged by the Spirit."

As twenty-first-century Christians we may find it a challenge to celebrate Pentecost year after year. For many it is one Sunday when red is seen both on the pulpit and on the preacher, the Scripture is taken from Acts, and there is conversation about the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church. It may not seem like a really big deal.

Modern conversation often focuses on the particulars of the story and whether the story is an analogy or metaphor. Certainly loud winds don't enter buildings. Certainly tongues of fire do not fly around and land on people. Certainly a group of Hebrew speakers don't suddenly become multilingual. The unbelievable becomes such a stumbling block that we may question the whole event. Others feel they must accept the account of the event as accurate. The Holy Spirit did come and was manifest as fire and tongues and wind. The people did all understand each other. But it was a one-time occurrence and not something that the church in the following centuries can expect to happen again. The church needed a jolt to get started and to get the people fired up. However, the Holy Spirit has been domesticated over the years and no longer makes such dramatic appearances.

A suggestion is to read this story as if it happened yesterday and ask what it has to say to today's church. Such a choice requires that we ask ourselves some difficult questions. Where is the Holy Spirit today? Is the Holy Spirit still able to fill a room with fire and wind? How are we like the men and women in the upper room?

How can the fire of the Holy Spirit change us? What does it mean to witness to the good news that God is both a promise maker and promise keeper?

Most of us describe the church today in different ways. It is an institution; it is the local congregation; it is the worldwide body of believers. As an institution it is often characterized by boards and agencies, national and local staff, shrinking budgets, reorganization, and a general attempt to be effective without enough money or people. Many local congregations face shrinking budgets and memberships and a never-ending struggle to get new members and to find new directions. As a worldwide body of believers we see divisions and differences, struggles over doctrine, and competition for members. Today's American church often reflects the individualism of our culture. We live in a society of "me" with little understanding of the meaning of "we." This is reflected in an intense focus on individual salvation and the question "What can the church do for me?" While there has been an increased interest in the person of Jesus and in the nature of spirituality in society in general, "the theology and life of the community of faith have been largely neglected."

The emphasis throughout both the Old and New Testaments is on the community of God's people. When God called the people of Israel into a covenant relationship, God's promises were intended for a whole people, not individuals. Peter did not preach a word of individual salvation as much as issue an invitation to be part of a body of people who believed that Jesus was God's Messiah.

The second chapter of Acts describes the new community that formed at Pentecost. In many ways it stands in stark contrast to many churches today. Not only did the community gather for meals and prayer and not only did they listen to the teaching of the apostles, but they also shared what they owned with one another, even selling possessions to provide for others. They ate with glad and generous hearts, and "the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47b).

More than two thousand years ago Christ called those men and women to be witnesses. Christ still calls us to be witnesses and to tell what we know is true. The television personality Oprah Winfrey often asks guests what they know for sure. That is also a question today's Christians must answer. It is impossible to be a witness if we do not know for sure. A witness is someone who tells what he or she knows is true. We often associate witnesses with crimes and with court trials. Witnesses are called to take an oath about the truth of what they will say and then to explain what they know about the case before the court. What did you see? What did you hear? What happened? We need to ask what is still true as we celebrate Pentecost today and struggle to rediscover the meaning of being a witness. It is still true that our God is a God who makes and keeps promises. It is still true that our God acted in history through the person of Jesus Christ to redeem God's people. It is still true that the

Is the Holy Spirit still able to fill a room with fire and wind?

The second chapter of Acts presents a challenge to us, as it shows us a version of the church that met together for meals and worship, listened together to the teaching of the apostles, shared possessions with one another in such a way that no one was in need, and celebrated with glad and generous hearts. People wanted to join this church! What did they have that many churches today are missing?

Pentecost is just the beginning of the church. Just as we would not assume to know a person by hearing only about the day she was born, we should not assume we know all there is to know about the early church by reading about Pentecost. To fully understand the challenge the new church presents to the contemporary church, we must read the rest of Acts. The church did not stop with one dramatic event; it became a community of people who could not be stopped. They did what Jesus commanded them on the mountain. They told the story of God's Redeemer in Jerusalem, and then they started to tell people in Samaria and beyond. Acts ends with Paul's witness from Rome, which was the center of that part of the world.

Along the way they were challenged to do difficult things. In chapter 10, Peter had to overcome his preoccupation with Jewish dietary laws so that he could eat with Gentiles. In chapter 9, Paul had to see the world in a new way so that he could become a witness for the Christ. In chapter 8, Phillip had to put aside his prejudice about foreigners so that he could baptize a stranger. At no time did any of them ask what the church was going to do for them. Again and again and again throughout Acts, the Holy Spirit gave men and women the power to do things they never imagined they could do. The Holy Spirit gave birth to witnesses who told the truth of what they knew about God's Messiah. For two thousand years witnesses have continued to do the same thing. If this were not true, then none of us would have heard this good news. Perhaps the message of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit is still giving birth to the church and inspiring witnesses despite worries and appearances to the contrary. We will celebrate Pentecost Sunday, God's gift of the church and our churches ministry and mission on June 12th and you are invited to wear red.

Peace in Christ, Pastor Tom

Clothing Drive

Greater Galway Community Services Association will sponsor a clothing drive on June 11, 2011 at 9AM to 1PM in front of the Galway Lions Building (2167 Galway-Ballston Rd.). All clothing will go to the City Mission of Schenectady which will, in return, provide the Food Pantry with gift certificates for use by pantry patrons at the Glenville Mission Store.

This is a Win-Win situation for all!

Ministry Opportunity At Maplewood Manor

**Maplewood Manor, the Saratoga County
Nursing Home**

Where our church has a ministry, will be holding its annual party/fund-raising event on Wednesday June 15 from 10 to 4.

This fund-raiser supports programs and entertainment for the home's 277 residents. Donations of gift certificates, gently used items, crafts, or plants for the White Elephant sale are appreciated. There will be a bake sale as well. Items for the bake sale can be dropped off on Monday June 13 or Tuesday June 14 at the facility at 149 Ballston Avenue in Ballston Spa.

Volunteers are needed on June 15 to assist with transporting residents to various events. A training session on how to move a wheelchair safely will be provided at 9:30 AM. Anyone able to help in anyway may call the activities department 885-2288 Ext. 4562 for more information or to arrange for pickup of donations if needed.



Summer Fellowship Resumes- JUNE 19

Once again we are planning for outdoor (weather permitting) fellowship on the front lawn following worship this summer. The deacons are inviting members of the congregation to sign up to provide a simple snack of finger food (cookies, fruit, cheese, etc.) and a cold drink one Sunday during the Summer. The sign-up sheet will be in the narthex. Cups and napkins are provided and can be found in the cabinets in the northeast corner of the kitchen. Our fellowship together following worship provides a witness in the community to God's love. Please join the deacons in participating in this ministry which celebrates our spirit of unity and proclaims Christ's love.

Let the Deacons know...

If you know of any people graduating from high school or college this summer please let Suzanne Arnold or Helen King know so that the deacons can recognize their achievement.

Church Picnic on June 12

Our annual celebration and church picnic will be held following worship on June 12 in the church yard. All are invited. Hotdogs, hamburgers, and drinks will be provided. Please bring a side or dessert to share. People are needed at 9am to help set up the tables and grills. This is our last 10:30 worship Sunday before going to our summer schedule. There will be games and fun for everyone, but most importantly we will have an opportunity to join in fellowship and appreciation of the ministry that we share.

SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

MAY 2, 2011

- Tom and Chris Nelson met with and got information from Life Touch, which is a company that takes pictures for a church directory. Session decided to pursue the idea in the fall.
- The Presbytery Triennial visit will be next month during our monthly Session meeting.
- The Albany Presbytery will be visiting different locations to meet with its members to address ministry needs. The staff will lead a series of workshops and facilitate conversations which they hope will be helpful and effective.
- The Deacons continue to make visits to the sick and Maplewood Manor, prepare communion and take food to the Galway food pantry.
- The Facilities group cleaned up the yard from the winter. A light ballast was replaced in the dining hall.
- The next fundraiser will be the ham dinner in the fall and discussions and meetings will probably begin in July.
- The annual picnic will be held June 12, 2011. There will also be a brief congregational meeting after worship and before the picnic.
- A suggestion was made for the greeters to have name tags.
- Meeting adjourned at 9:00 PM.

Treasurer's Report	
Local Fund	
Balance 4/1/11	-\$5,419.51
Receipts	13,220.45
Expenses	14,896.52
Balance 5/1/11	-\$7,095.58
Barbeque	1,989.75
Baskets-Raffle	1,055.65
Rummage	1,030.25
Clothing	410.00
These funds not deposited until May	

WCUPC – June 2011

◀ May 2011	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Jul 2011 ▶
				1	2 Deacons Meet 7 PM	3	4	
	5 9:00 AM Choir Practice 10:30 AM Worship Service Sunday School & Child Care 11:45 Adult Bible Study	6 Session Meets 7 PM Women's Association Dinner 6:30 PM	7	8	9	10	11	
	Flowers: Aileen Donnan							
	12 Pentecost Sunday COMMUNION 9:00 AM Choir Practice 10:30 AM Worship Service Sunday School & Child Care 11:45 Adult Bible Study 12:00 Church Picnic	13	14	15	16	17	18	
	Flowers: Barbara Cervenka							
	19 Trinity Sunday Father's Day SUMMER HOURS COMMUNION FELOWSHIP FOOD PANTRY SUNDAY 9:30 AM Worship Service	20	21	22	23	24	25	
	Flowers: Winnie Brice							
	26 9:30 Am Worship Service FELOWSHIP	27	28	29	30	Notes:		
	Flowers: Open							