

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House
Day of Pentecost
May 23, 2010

The Gift of Spirit
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Today is Pentecost, Greek, literally meaning the 50th day after Easter. It is the day in the universal Christian church that commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles.

Searching for answers about the origin of the day to help us better understand its meaning turn up other information, such as the fact that this Sunday is also called Whitsunday (for anyone who read The Pillar you would have found that reference), so called because of the white clothing worn on this day for Baptisms that often followed Easter.

It is also the time of the Shavuot, the Jewish feast that occurs on the sixth day of the Jewish Month of Sivan (late May or early June). It commemorates the day God gave the Torah to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, but it is also one of the three Shalosh Regalim - pilgrimage festivals, along with the Passover Feast and the Diaspora of the Jewish nation.

In much the same way as the Jewish nation experienced the Diaspora or spreading of its people over the lands of the Earth, there are parallels between this and the spreading of the word over the Earth, the Word and witness of Jesus Christ through the giving of the Holy Spirit, once again by God to a people for its own spreading, Diaspora, or modern term...dispersment.

I am still learning about all these things...

I was not brought up reading the Bible in the tradition of my birth. At some levels it was even discouraged. The clergy would read it and tell us what it meant. Ironical that I am called for this time to a place that is named after a 15th century reformer who was burned at the stake for among other reasons his insistence in translating the bible into the vernacular.

So, I simply took what I was told, as it was told to be true and descriptive of the reality and conditions under which these Scriptures and holy books come to us. Today, it was an act of believing that is like believing the Earth is, well, flat.

And in many ways then and now over the years, refusing to accept the flatness of these teachings, challenging the flatness of the Earth, got you pushed to the edge of the plain – or over the frame into the great abyss.

In some ways the "flatness," in terms of how we perceive history, the universe, and beyond is still the problem. We know it's not true. If you've ever slid down a snowy hill or walked up a mountain trail, you know it's not true. Yet, from a distance, looking at things beyond our immediate locus - everything looks more level to us than we might wish to admit.

During the season, I have a small share in a beach house on Long Island. I try get out there on my days off and when i can, and one of my favorite things to do is to just walk the beach at night and get lost in the stars, so magnificently on display far from the light pollution of the city.

Last Thursday night was an exceptional night for star-gazing. My neighbor was out walking the beach doing the same thing. As we started pointing out the constellations he began to talk about a show he had recently seen on TV that explained how the constellations we see, that seem to be flat, are anything but.

He used the Big Dipper, one of the constellations discovered in the second century by Ptolemy and the only one mentioned in the Bible, referred to as the Great Bear or Arcturus: Job 9:9: "[God] who made the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the chambers of the south."

My friend went on to talk about how in the Big Dipper, which is actually an "asterism," that is part of a constellation – the greater constellation being the "Great Bear" of the Bible. He talked of those some of the stars are millions of light years closer and some are millions of light years away, but from our perspective, they all seem to be on the same plane, some a little dimmer than others, but all on the same plane – which could be nothing further than the truth. We see it as flat because we understand "flat" at a distance better than great dimensions.

In some ways it's ironic that the greater the dimension of things the less clearly we see them.

The same is true of time. Talk to young people about the AIDS crisis and they look at you quizzically, having no idea what living through the 1980's was like. Talk about 9/11 or the Vietnam War, Cherokee Trail, Ironsides and the Merrimac – after a period of time they all become studies with no living witnesses. Time becomes flat and morphs history into a straight line – we even call it that – a time line.

In some way we create our own myths, with better science, perhaps, still trying to explain and know what can be known but not explained.

We can know God – without the need of space or time; yet it is our acquired nature to put everything into space and time – in other words, to "frame" God.

Make an asterism or a constellation or a galaxy of God so we can get a better view and understanding in our mind. Ahh, the other problem – it's not a total mind thing either.

It's no surprise then, that when we look "*back in time*" to observe what is "*out of time and place*" we "see through a glass darkly" as Paul tells us in 1 Cor. 13, 12. We miss a lot...and we always will, left to our own devices.

In Acts of the Apostles, the Pentecost or arrival of the Advocate is described. According to the text the disciples started to speak in such gibberish that those who were observing thought them to be drunk. Peter had to get up and say, it's too early in the day for them to be drunk!

Giving dimension to the event, the setting, the time, and the place – imagine a large group, gathering for some of the traditional observances mentioned or others that were going on. And then imagine this group of disciples suddenly and simultaneously overcome by the Spirit.

Let's use the constellation example, using references we can understand to get a glimpse into something we cannot see clearly or understand.

Sitting in or watching on TV a stadium filled with tens of thousands of people suddenly breaking into what appears to be a perfectly choreographed wave, rising and falling on cue.

A wedding. Everyone is behaving well and then suddenly the crowd rises to the music of the Blues Brothers and people are transformed. No different from when the Hokey Pokey, Tarantella, or Jura, or Electric Slide are played and people are out of their chairs in a heartbeat. Are they all drunk? Of course not, but what gets them up, on their feet, moving, laughing, talking, crossing the boundaries and edges of different groups, like crossing the edge of a flat earth...

To find there is more, not less than what you knew moments or seconds before.

Something suddenly emerges – not from the music, but in response to the music.

My office adjoins a room that is used for 12 step meetings – 50 of them a week. Some of the groups are quite large. Last night as I was preparing for today, one of the groups finished their meeting around 8 P.M. The door opened and I heard 40 voices all talking at once, animated, in discussion, and I could not pick out a single word – it all came together in a way that sounded like they were drunk – and that was the farthest thing from the truth. Every conversation in the midst of the twenty or thirty conversations was being heard and the response was to the Spirit that filled that room in the way the Spirit fills our world.

I am absolutely sure, from this distant place in time [if there is such a thing as place in time], I am absolutely sure that the Spirit and the Presence of God and Jesus filled those disciples and they responded even more powerfully than anything we described this morning, so powerfully, in fact, that the story has been told these 2000 years. And if that were the end of it, that would be pretty good in itself.

But it's not. The story is one that has always been and continues today. The power of the Gift of the Spirit of God, the Advocate that Jesus promised, the Presence of God in our lives always calls for a response. That's the return gift: our response to the call of the Spirit.

The Gift of the Spirit is what it brings out of us.

There is nothing flat about such a relationship with God. There is nothing predictable about such a relationship with God.

On this fiftieth or so day after Easter, this Whitsunday, or Shavuot – the question is the same as it has been since long before Ptolemy, Job, or any of us:

What will our response be to the Gift and Power of the Spirit in our lives?

[Let not your hearts be troubled...]

It's why many of us come here and to places like it. We seek to know such things. It is why some of us join – to be a part of something in response to something we see, feel, or know – without fully understanding.

The Gift of the Spirit is more...

May our responses be more, as well.

Amen.