

Typology, Pentecost, and Us

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Those of us who were raised on the historical-critical method have some difficulty considering typology a possibility for contemporary sermon preparation. Often we classify it with allegory as one of those ancient forms of biblical interpretation that we have gladly grown out of in more recent centuries. But typology is not the same as allegory. Furthermore, whereas it would be quite possible to imagine the scripture itself with all allegory removed—though a few passages would have to go—it would be difficult to imagine the biblical text were all typology to be taken from it. It would be mangled beyond recognition.

Typology is a way of relating events. It assumes the historical character of the events it is dealing with. It assumes that whatever similarity these events have is intended by God and obvious to those who are part of the ongoing history of God's People. It is not an esoteric hermeneutic available only to the scholars but rather a linking of events that the whole faithful congregation is able to make because they are part of that history.

Typology relates the Old Testament to the New, the New to the Old, and it relates events within the testaments. The process does not end with the closing of the canon, for much of our liturgical life—the sacraments, the church year—is the manifestation in our contemporary life of the types known from the history found within the canon. In addition, armed with the understanding of God's actions in history we are enabled to see current events more from God's perspective than from our human one.

There is one great impediment to the employment of typology in our current setting: the loss of sufficient biblical knowledge and familiarity for congregations to make the appropriate connections that Christians in other times and places would have made quite readily. This is often a limitation on the preacher as well. Typology carefully used may be a way of restoring such knowledge rather than assuming it.

Pentecost is an excellent time to see the significance of typology and its usefulness in contemporary preaching. What we shall do in the following pages is to look at the Acts account of Pentecost and see what are some of the typological overtones that a congregation in the early church would have easily understood. Following that, we shall look at the various lectionary selections that are paired with the Acts text for the celebration of Pentecost, to see what types are actually picked up. Then we shall look at possible pairings that the creators of the lectionary did not choose. In conclusion, we shall discuss how the analysis of our contemporary situation can guide in the selection from the many typological possibilities what would be most helpful and appropriate for the occasion of preaching in our current setting.

Typology and Pentecost

To see the typological connections for Pentecost requires a somewhat tedious examination of specific biblical themes and texts. It would be helpful to consider how many of these would be within the general knowledge of the congregation.

Acts 2:1-21 is the basic text for Pentecost. The gift of the Spirit is the major theme, but the question can be asked: Is this gift of the Spirit foreshadowed in other events? Are there signs here that point to other occasions so that we have some wider biblical

context within which to interpret this event? There are several. Some are physical phenomena: the sound of a violent wind and tongues of fire. Some have to do with speech: power to communicate across language barriers; speaking of God's deeds of power; ability to prophesy; calling on God's name for salvation. Some are eschatological: the last days; the Lord's day.

For a Christian even minimally versed in the biblical narrative, the mention of fire would bring to mind the use of fire in the leading of God's people: the burning bush in the call of Moses; the fiery pillar that went before the children of Israel by night, replacing the pillar of cloud of the daytime; the fiery chariots and horses that signal the presence of divine power in the lives of Elijah and Elisha. The mention of the strong wind would have overtones of the creation story: the mighty wind or spirit from God that swept over the waters, and the Spirit of God that comes upon the prophets to enable them to prophecy truly, so that the people are guided by God.

The references to speech and language would bring to mind Babel, where human languages were confused, and creation, where God spoke and things were brought into being. The ability to prophesy truly is a gift of the Spirit and involves receiving a word from God and the task of proclaiming it. Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones incorporates the work of the Spirit in re-creation that parallels the work of creation, as well as the gift of the Spirit to give human speech divine power. Guidance of the people, creation and re-creation: clearly these overtones would be present when a Christian congregation heard of the tongues of fire and the strong wind in the Pentecost account.

The mention of the day of the Lord in the quote from Joel ties Pentecost to judgment, with salvation in the day of judgment for those who call upon the name of the Lord. The words from Joel also include a mention of fire as part of that judgment. Judgment and the Spirit are often tied together. In the Matthew and Luke accounts of John the Baptist we read that the one who comes after him will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. In the temptations that follow the baptism of Jesus, it is the Spirit that leads him into the time of judgment.

Pentecost in the Revised Common Lectionary

The lectionary suggests an Old Testament passage that may be used instead of the Acts text. In each case, the typological character of these options is clearly in evidence. Year C uses the story of Babel; Year B suggests the valley of dry bones: the Spirit that once created out of nothing is also able to re-create out of dead bones. Year A uses the passage in Numbers 11, where some of the elders of the people receive a share of the Spirit that was on Moses, enabling them to prophesy. Included is the wish of Moses that all of the people would share in this Spirit, and all would be prophets. The quotation from Joel used in Acts points to the fulfillment of this hope.

The psalm for all three years is a portion of Psalm 104 that speaks of God's acts of creation when the Spirit is sent forth. The themes of creation and new creation, of the power of language to divide or unite, and the role of the Spirit in prophecy all are typologically related to the Acts passage. None of the lectionary selections from the Old Testament deals with the day of judgment (although judgment is clearly involved in the Babel story). Nor is there any passage referring to God's guidance or leading though the wilderness.

In all three years, the Gospel selection is taken from John, in different years using portions of chapters 7, 14, 15, 16, and 20. In each case there is a specific mention of

the gift of the Spirit, with special emphasis on the connection between the glorification of Jesus—after the crucifixion—and the sending of the Spirit. In John 20 there is also the breath that is the sign of the Spirit.

The lectionary offers the Acts 2 passage as an option to the epistle, in case the Old Testament selection was used. Clearly the assumption is that the Acts text should be used in place of either the Old Testament or the epistle. The epistle selections are I Corinthians 12 in Year A, which refers to the gifts of the Spirit, including tongues and prophecy, as well as the need for the Spirit in order to say “Jesus is Lord.” This parallels the conclusion of the Acts 2 reading. It includes also the unity of the body which the Spirit empowers. There is a reference to baptism, by which the Spirit incorporates us into one body.

Years B and C both use sections of Romans 8: verses 14-17 in year C, and verses 22-27 in year B. The earlier verses speak of the Spirit of adoption that makes us heirs with Christ. The latter section speaks of creation groaning, preparing for the new creation of which we have received the first fruits in the Spirit.

If we use the lectionary, the obvious typological choices that are given are the role of the Spirit in creation and re-creation, unity and overcoming divisions within the human community, and power to speak or prophesy God’s word.

Other Typological Possibilities

Though some classic typologies have been used by the creators of the lectionary, it is also interesting to see what other themes have been omitted that would have been quite obvious to an early church congregation. For instance, the connection of speech and the Spirit is clearly to be seen in Mark 13:9-13 and the parallels in Matthew 10:16-20 and Luke 12:8-12. In each case, the setting is the coming persecution of the followers of Jesus. The disciples are told not to worry about what to say when they are taken before the authorities. In Mark and Matthew, it is stated that it is not the disciple but the Holy Spirit who will do the speaking. In Luke, the Holy Spirit will teach the disciples at the moment of need what they are to say. The role of the Holy Spirit in helping or causing Christians to testify faithfully in the midst of persecution is an interesting parallel to the Pentecost passage in Acts. It speaks of the power that is needed to speak truthfully and faithfully, whereas we often assume that is an easy task because we do not think of ourselves as persecuted. But such a passage would raise interesting questions about why so many in “mainline” churches find “witnessing” distasteful or inappropriate. What does the message of Pentecost have to say about our silence? The words of Moses in Numbers 11:29 are helpful: “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!”

A second interesting theme is to be found in Isaiah 63:7-14. After recalling the works of God for the salvation of the people, we read these words: “But they rebelled and grieved his holy spirit; therefore he became their enemy; he himself fought against them” (vs.10). Pentecost speaks of the gift of Holy Spirit. But can Christians “grieve the holy spirit”? Can God become our enemy?

Typologically this same theme is seen in the many references to the cloud and fiery pillar that are the sign of God’s presence with the people by day and by night during the time of the wandering in the wilderness. Ezekiel, in his vision of the judgment coming upon Jerusalem, sees this sign of the glory of God’s presence leave the Temple and depart from Jerusalem (10:1-23). Can the grieving of the Spirit cause such radical and terrible results for us? The letters to the seven churches in the second and third

chapters of the Book of Revelation all stress the words that the Spirit says to the churches, words that imply judgment and a call to renewed faithfulness.

The passages selected by the lectionary stress the power of the Spirit given at Pentecost, but they do not deal with the possibility of greater judgment upon us because of that Spirit if we are not faithful to the gift that has been given.

It is also interesting to note that none of the lectionary selections points to the emphasis on the holiness of the Spirit. Pentecost not only celebrates the gift of power to the assembled disciples: it also stresses that this power is the power to be holy. The character of that early community portrayed in the verses that follow the Pentecost account is a community that truly loves one another, and the power of the Spirit is seen as much in that as in their power to witness to those around them. The church grows because of the evident holiness of the community—a holiness that is beyond human ability—as well as the words of the church. The power of the Spirit is experienced in the holiness of the Christians as well as in their witnessing. In our celebration of Pentecost we cannot omit the holiness that the Spirit makes possible for us. In fact, it was this lack of holiness that grieved the Spirit in the accounts of Isaiah and Ezekiel. The lectionary overlooks the emphasis on holiness implied in the gift of the Holy Spirit. Epistle selections include verses 14-17 and 22-29 of Romans 8, but verses 2-13 of that same chapter which stress the holiness of the life lived in the Spirit, are not included. The earlier part of the chapter is used in various other places in the lectionary—in Lent and in Ordinary Time—but Pentecost is a unique opportunity to show the connection between the power of the Spirit and the life of holiness to which we are called. Without this connection, holiness can easily be reduced to a requirement that can readily be fulfilled by human power, rather than as a gift beyond all human ability. The early Christian community can then be seen as the miracle it is. It could lead us to pray for the same miraculous power in our own lives, rather than looking at that early community as an example we can in no way live up to, and therefore can dismiss. That early community also demonstrated that holiness is not simply an individual characteristic but above all the nature of life in community when that community is indeed empowered by the Spirit.

The psalm selection shows the same desire to avoid the stress on holiness (Psalm 104:24-34,35b). Why is 34a omitted? It reads: “Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more.” The rest of the passage deals with the glory of God seen in the goodness of creation. For Pentecost, the most significant verses are probably 29-30 which point to our creation as living beings because God’s breath has been put within us. When the Spirit is given we are created; when it is withdrawn, we return to dust. 35a points to the holiness that God’s Spirit expects. We may not wish to deal with it—but omitting half a verse because it points in a direction we do not care to follow is a very strange thing to do. If the psalm is read or sung by the congregation from a psalter, it would be almost impossible to omit the verse. It therefore seems very strange to eliminate it in the lectionary. There is a liturgically useful verse earlier in the psalm. Verse 4 reads: “You make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.” For Pentecost, that would seem particularly appropriate.

Our Contemporary Setting

If we understand our situation to be one of congruence between the church and the surrounding society, then there will probably be little emphasis either on sin and judgment or on the need for evangelism. If we understand our situation to be that we

are not generally faced with great temptations, and by our own strength we can be fairly decent people, then the need for power beyond our own in the decisions we make every day will not be felt. If we live in fairly isolated communities, where danger lies “out there” and neither our churches nor our neighborhoods includes those whom we believe to be dangerous, then we will not see any need for the power to create community that includes both “us” and “them.” If these are the characteristics of our congregations, then a celebration of Pentecost will not mean much.

Pentecost is a great event for those who see the human impossibility of true community across the economic, racial, and cultural lines that divide our cities and indeed the whole society—and yet hear the Gospel message that through the power of the Holy Spirit, unleashed in our world through the death, resurrection, and glorification of Jesus, such communities are possible and have even been created. Pentecost is a great event for those who understand that the society in which we live presents us with temptations that deny the gospel we proclaim in almost every decision we make—or fail to make. These temptations are subtle because we have so accepted the basic premises of our society that what appears to be “realistic” or even “possible” is already totally compromised. The gift of the Spirit is the gift of new eyes to see reality from God’s perspective, and to see that possibility in the life of the Spirit is far different from what we had understood. Pentecost is a celebration for those who realize that sin and judgment are real because evil does have enormous power in our world and in our lives—and the creation God intends is a holy and righteous one. God has given us the Holy Spirit in order to participate in the renewal of creation that is part and parcel of the meaning of redemption. Pentecost is a celebration for those who have heard, believed, and experienced the power of the Holy Spirit in overcoming sin, in enabling community across traditional lines of enmity, in victorious lives that the rest of the world may see as foolish. Pentecost is a celebration for those who feel compelled to tell others about God’s work in their midst and let them see the new creation in their congregations.

For early Christians, the line between the values held by the church and those that were the basis of the wider society was quite obvious. For them, the power of the Spirit was also obvious. To celebrate Pentecost in our own day and setting may need a great deal of preliminary work in clarifying what our situation as Christians really is. Without that, Pentecost is likely to remain quite insignificant to many in our congregations.

The Sacraments

Pentecost was one of the times in the early church when baptisms were performed, for there is a connection between baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Not only is the Trinitarian formula used, but there is usually a remembrance of the activity of the Spirit in creation and in the words of John the Baptist about the work of Jesus. In the actual baptismal service there is usually an invocation of the Spirit upon those baptized, so that they may be sealed and strengthened. The imperative to evangelism at the conclusion of Matthew’s Gospel ties evangelism and discipleship to baptism.

As a part of the liturgical renewal, many Protestant traditions that had earlier abandoned the “renunciations,” now do include them. The renunciations make clear that in baptism we not only accept Christ, but we also reject or turn away from the ways of sin and evil in our world. It is not antiquarianism that has made the renunciations

useful in our day; it is also the increasing recognition that the line of demarkation between the values the church espouses and those on which the surrounding society is based are not the same. Dying to sin and rising to righteousness are at the heart of the meaning of baptism.

These themes can readily be used if there is a baptism on Pentecost Sunday. If there is not, the reminder of the meaning of our baptism can be lifted up, tying the significance of the day to the identity we already have as baptized people.

If the Eucharist is celebrated at Pentecost, the unity—the communion—which is given to the church by the Spirit is made visible at the common table. The Sacrament also brings us forgiveness for our lack of holiness and renewal and strengthening for greater faithfulness. “Holy things for the holy people” is the ancient invitation. Unity and holiness are two of the great gifts of the Spirit to the church.

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is intimately linked with the historic understandings of the Eucharist. In the western liturgies affected by the liturgical renewal, the *epiclesis*—the invocation of the Spirit to sanctify and empower the sacrament—is restored to the significance it has always had in the Eastern churches. The Spirit makes real and efficacious the actions we carry out at Jesus’ command. This is close to Calvin’s view, which has been lost sight of for generations. There is a Real Presence of Christ, because of the Spirit.

In both sacraments, it is the work of the Spirit to tie us to the Risen Christ. Even as Jesus, the Son of God, was conceived by the Holy Spirit, so we are re-created, adopted and nourished as the children of God by that same Spirit. Remembering our baptism; gathering at the Table: these are appropriate ways to celebrate Pentecost.