

Sermons at Christ Church

Building Relationships through Love.

Pentecost Sunday
Rev. Emmanuel Mercer

Today, we say yes. Today, we celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples who had been hiding for fear of the Jewish authorities. While they were gathered in prayer, the Holy Spirit came upon them. And when they realized the power that had been poured upon them, they said yes, and then went out in public to proclaim the very good news for which they were in hiding.

Two miracles happened on that day, one, the outpouring of the promised Holy Spirit. Two, the speaking of tongues. The pilgrims and residents who had gathered in Jerusalem could hear the disciples speak about the good news of Jesus Christ in their own language. These disciples of Jesus who had never traveled anywhere, studied any other language or speak any language apart from Aramaic, could be heard speaking in different languages.

But those who had always been suspicious of the group and their executed leader, thought that the disciples were drunk. They were not marveled by the miracle; they were steeped deep in their cynicism.

In response Peter spoke up and ended his elaborate summation of the good news by making the point that anyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved-anyone who says yes, shall be saved. That was a seismic shift from an exclusive salvation to an inclusive salvation, that anyone who can yes, yes and yes, shall be saved.

Thirty years prior to this incident, Peter and his mostly fishermen friends had said yes, yes, we will follow you. These men were not the perfect men in Jerusalem or Galilee, they were not men of eloquence and deep faith, they betrayed Jesus, they denied knowing him, they questioned Jesus, they were quick-tempered, prejudiced and full of arrogance.

But Jesus accepted them for who they were because God uses damaged goods. God uses those who simply say yes, irrespective of who they are. God uses God's treasure and God's treasure is the human being who can say yes.

After Peter preached the good news to the people, they asked, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And then Peter told them, repent and be baptized, and you shall receive the Holy Spirit. In other words, say yes. And that day, 3000 people said yes and they received the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is God-the third person of the Trinity. It is the love that is shared eternally between the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is present in us in love and breathes divine life into us. It does not remain near us; it dwells within us and acts within us.

One of the ways in which the Holy Spirit acts is through the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working miracles, prophecy, discernment, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues. These are gifts that perfect our hearts, shapes our desires and lead us ever more deeply into the life of God.

And for centuries, people have been saying yes. Not because of coercion or force, but because they heard the life-changing power of the good news. You are here today because you said yes. You are watching us online because you also said yes. And all those who have been saying yes, are God’s treasure. And God uses God’s treasure, as imperfect as they may be, as damaged as they may be, with all the diverse gifts which the Holy Spirits activates in us, to say the unsayable, to bring the light of the gospel to the dark places of our world, to highlight the plight of those on the margins, to mend God’s creation and to do something new in each life.

One of the people who said yes was St. Lawrence of Rome. During the reign of Emperor Valerian, the prefect of Rome demanded that St Lawrence turn over the riches of the Church. St. Lawrence asked for three days to gather the wealth. He distributed as much Church property to the indigent as possible to prevent it from being seized by the prefect. On the third day, he presented himself to the prefect. When ordered to deliver the treasures of the Church, he presented the city's poor, crippled, blind, and suffering, and declared that these were the true treasures of the Church. St. Lawrence would later be burned on a gridiron.

Lawrence made a powerful statement with his actions. The treasures of the church are not its properties; the treasures of the church are the people who may be extremely damaged, but are empowered by the Holy Spirit to use whatever gifts that they have to do God’s work, to extend God’s kingdom, to repair the breach and to fix the broken. And we do this ministry not because we ourselves are fixed but because we rely on the Holy Spirit.

I once heard a story about a pastor who visited a parishioner who had contracted polio. The pastor prayed for Miss. Gibbs but then told her that the church didn't want her to come back. They were afraid of her polio. Miss Gibbs said that she understood their fear and she wouldn't return. She then asked if the pastor could pray that God would find something for her to do. The pastor looked at her and said "Miss Gibbs, you have to understand that God is through with you." Miss Gibbs turned to the pastor and said "You're wrong. I am extremely damaged goods, but God loves to use extremely damaged goods."

When the pastor departed, Miss. Gibbs called her son and said to him "God is never through with anybody. If you've got breath, you've got something to do for God."

It didn't take long before another pastor came to town and visited Miss. Gibbs. He told Miss Gibbs that "We don't have any kids in our Sunday School, but we do have a Sunday school, would you like to head it?" Miss. Gibbs said, "I'd love to."

Miss Gibbs started with two kids, but it often felt like there were hundred kids. Soon enough, people wanted to see this woman who was strapped in a wheelchair and talking to kids. The Sunday School started to grow.

One day Miss Gibbs told her son that they had to do something to bring more kids to Sunday School. "There's a bus company in town, let's go there and have them give us a bus so we can bring some kids to Sunday School." The son responded that "Mom, I don't think they give buses away.

But she said, "Do you not understand that ask and you shall receive?"

So, they went to the bus company, met the receptionist who asked how she might help. Miss. Gibbs said, "Well, I came to see you so I can get a bus." The receptionist asked, "Do you want to buy one or rent one?" Miss Gibbs said, "No. We don't have money; we need you to give us one so we can bring kids to Sunday school."

The owner appeared and said to Miss Gibbs "Lady, I understand you want me to give you a bus, but I am not going to do it." Miss Gibbs said to him "I will tell you one thing, one day, when you stand before God, he's gonna be awfully upset with you, if you don't give me a bus."

The owner looked at Miss Gibbs and asked, "If I give you a bus, who is going to drive it?" "Well, I never thought about that." And then she said, "I need you to give me a bus and a driver."

The man looked at Miss Gibbs and said “Something is tearing up inside of me. Here’s the deal. I’m gonna give you one bus, one driver, one Sunday.” Miss Gibbs then said, “There are two sides of town, and I was fearful to ask for two buses and two drivers.’ The owner said to her “Here’s the deal, two buses and two drivers for one Sunday.” And then he said this “You got to promise me that Gd knows about this.” “I will.” Miss Gibbs responded.

He only gave Miss Gibbs two buses and two drivers for that first Sunday because the second Sunday, he gave 3 buses and 3 drivers, and in less than two years he gave Miss Gibbs 35 buses and 35 drivers every Sunday. In five years, the Sunday Schol that had no kids now had 5000 kids. And it was run by a lady who couldn’t do anything for herself and who in her own words was extremely damaged goods. But she was right about something, God loves to use damaged goods.

How damaged do you think you are? Do you desire to offer yourself as a treasure for God to use you and your gifts?

The owner of the bus company would later write to Miss Gibbs, among other things, he said “Because you cared.” And then, “I don’t know how you got me to paint those buses in the church’s colors, but we even did that.” This was a man who said yes. Can you say yes?

What I learned from Miss Gibb’s story is that when we say yes, new life begins. When we say yes, transformation happens. When we say yes, life takes on a new meaning, when we say yes, the good news comes alive, when we say yes, we begin to see the treasure that is everyone, when we say yes, we are set aflame to use our gifts.

Miss Gibbs knew it wasn’t about her, it was about the work of the Holy Spirit which activates the gifts in us so that each of us like Miss Gibbs herself, her son, the receptionist, Sunday School teachers, bus company owner, bus drivers and the pastor are empowered to contribute towards the common good.

Those who say yes are God’s treasure marked by three-character traits. First, they are committed to prayer. Second, they are committed to teaching and fellowship. Third, they are committed to identifying disciples who would be models of apostolic leadership.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we say yes and make ourselves available to be set aflame for God. We say yes to the Holy Spirit that awakens God’s gifts in us.

Amen.