

5-27-2007, Pentecost C

Chapelwood UMC, Lake Jackson, TX

It Just Gets Better  
John 14:8-17

Some time ago I ran into an old friend I hadn't seen in awhile, and he asked me how I was doing. I said, "My son made it home from Iraq safe and sound. I'm serving a wonderful church. And I have two beautiful little grandsons. If life got any better, I don't think I could stand it."

Well, since then things have gotten better. My daughter-in-law informed us that she would be giving us another grandchild in September. You can imagine how excited I was to get that news. I didn't think it could get any better than that. Then a couple of weeks ago my daughter announced she is expecting in January.

I'm about ready to explode. That's what happens when things get as good as they can be and then they get even better. The Pointer Sisters sing a song with the lyrics, "I'm so excited, and I just can't hide it. I'm about to lose control, and I think I like it." That's what happens when things are so good you can't stand it. You get so excited you can't control your emotions anymore.

That's what happened on Pentecost. Easter was great. I mean, how much better can it get? In a day's time the disciples went from abject despair and grief to unbounded joy, as they discovered that Christ has conquered death. Over the next forty days, as Jesus came to them, they came to understand that Christ's resurrection meant that we would have eternal life. In his resurrection we see what is waiting for us. That's exciting.

But there was even more good news. Jesus promised them that another gift was coming to them, the gift of the Spirit. The disciples didn't understand what he was talking about. They couldn't see how things could get any better.

Forty days after the Resurrection, Jesus ascended into Heaven, with the promise that he would return. So, the disciples were alone. Christ was gone. But that was all right, because he would return. So, they waited.

They didn't have to wait long. Ten days later, as they were gathered in the Upper Room celebrating the Jewish festival of Pentecost, they were suddenly overwhelmed by the Presence of God.

That was too much. They were already as full of joy as they could be. Things got so much better they couldn't stand it. They just burst with joy. They were so full of joy

and thanksgiving that they began to shout praises to God. The Upper Room was too small to contain their joy and their praise. They ran out into the street praising God.

They made complete spectacles of themselves. And they didn't care.

Some of the people passing by thought that their emotional outburst was disgraceful. They thought they were drunk, even though it was only 9 o'clock in the morning.

But a lot of other folks were saying, "I don't know what they've got, but I want some of it." 4,000 people joined the church that day.

We do know what they had--or, more accurately, what had them. It was the Presence of God. Christ had come to them through the Holy Spirit. Not only did they have the assurance that in the end they would share Christ's victory over death. Now they knew they wouldn't even have to wait alone until then. The Holy Spirit would be with them.

That's what Christ had promised. He told them that he would send the Spirit of Truth to be with them. But, how could they possibly understand what he meant until it happened? They couldn't. They had no idea how wonderful this gift would be.

Today we celebrate that wonderful day. This is Pentecost Sunday.

What I want for us today is that we remind ourselves what a wonderful gift we received that day.

I had a class on Judaism in seminary. It was taught by a Jewish rabbi. One day he asked us what the difference between a church and a synagogue was. We talked about how similar our services are. We both read scriptures, sing hymns, preach sermons and so on. Other than the fact that we lift up the name of Christ and they don't, how are we different? Well, we students thought about that for a good while. Finally the rabbi said, "The difference is that when you Christians come together in church, you expect to fellowship with God. We Jews come together in the synagogue to remember when we used to be able to enter into God's presence in the Temple."

On Pentecost the presence of God entered into the fellowship of Christians. That day we were transformed into the Church. The Church is much more than a group of people who come together regularly to remind themselves about God and to live as Christ taught us to live. In the fellowship of the Church, we experience the Presence of God, the Spirit of Christ, through the Holy Spirit. That is what Jesus was talking about when he said, "Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, I will be there among them."

Isn't God present everywhere? Certainly. As Psalm 139 says, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are

there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast."

Certainly, God's presence is everywhere. But most people are not aware of God's presence everywhere. The Church is an amplifier. If we play a chord on an electric guitar without an amp, there's a sound--but you can just barely hear it. Then, when we turn on the amp, you can't help but hear it.

The Church amplifies the Spirit of God. Some churches amplify the Spirit of God more than others. It depends on two things: First, The quality of the fellowship of the individual members with God. Second, the quality of the fellowship of the members of the church with each other.

Have you ever visited a church in which you just felt that something was missing? There's a coldness, a lack of life, a lack of joy. That is a church in which the members have drifted away from God. They probably don't get along very well with each other either. They are quenching the Spirit. That church may have been on fire for the Lord at some point--but not any more. All they have left are the ashes. Certainly the presence of God is there. But you would have to be very sensitive to the Spirit to detect it, because the congregation won't be much help.

But when the members of a church have a close walk with the Lord, when they live daily in the presence of God, when they walk with Christ in trust and obedience, and when they are so filled with the grace and love of God that they share that they are graceful and loving with each other, the fire of the Spirit burns hotter and hotter. It just gets better and better.

You reach the point where you think, "If it gets any better than this, I don't think I will be able to stand it." But you can. You just reach a newer and higher level of the experience of the presence of God. You become a Spirit-filled church.

Now, I know that when we talk about a Spirit-filled church, people have images of churches in which the members seem to lose their minds, jump pews and have convulsions. But a truly Spirit-filled church is one in which the members are filled with joy and love and praise and thanksgiving.

Chapelwood is alive with the Spirit of God. You can feel it. You can see it in the joy and laughter of the members. It is manifested in the outreach of the church in caring for others.

I don't know about you, but there are times when I think, "If it gets much better than this, I don't know if I can stand it." But it can get even better, and we can stand it.

Let each of us make a commitment to grow in our fellowship with the Lord, not only for our sakes, as good as that is, but also for the good of the church. And let us continue to grow in being gracious and loving with one another.

Let the Spirit of God's Presence burn brighter and brighter. May we grow in joy and love and praise and thanksgiving. And may we amplify the Spirit until all the world is aware of God's presence.