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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
5/23/2010, Pentecost Sunday  
Acts 2:1-21, John 14:8-17, 25-27  
A Sermon for the Stubborn

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My beginning text this morning is an Ascension text with a Pentecost meaning. It comes from last Sunday's Ascension Gospel Reading. Jesus is speaking his final words to his disciples. Soon, he will ascend to heaven. But before he goes, he instructs his disciples to wait in the city for a kind of wondrous garment -- indeed, for being "clothed with power":

<sup>49</sup>And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are *clothed with power* from on high." (Luke 24:49, RSV)

This is a sermon for the stubborn. It is meant for those who are set in their ways. They have come to doubt whether they will ever change. It is a sermon for those who sigh and say to themselves, "Well, you can't teach an old dog new tricks, and I guess I'm an old dog!" This is a sermon, I say, for downhearted folks who feel that they are *powerless* to change. To all such discouraged ones I say, Do not give up. Do not sell yourself short. You fear that you do not have enough strength to change, to improve. But what does Jesus say to you?

...stay in the city, until you are clothed with *power* from on high."

This is a glorious promise. It is a Pentecost promise. It means that your day is not done, your story is not writ, you have unrealized power for something wonderful. You have power you have only begun to tap to become better. Indeed, you have power lying within you to come to resemble Christ himself. For Christ offers his Spirit to you! No wonder Pentecost is such a high festival of the Church year.

To rejoice in this idea and to linger with it, let me try to develop four points. First, I want to sympathize with the stubborn. My heart goes out to those who fear that they just can't change. Second, I want to point to our Savior Jesus Christ as our great, high *agent of change*. Third, I want to point to Christ himself as the direction we should go. After all, it is hard to change if we do not have a sense of destination. Otherwise, we might end up just sitting there, in misery, wanting to move, but uncertain which way to go. And last, I want to urge us *to return the favor* to Christ. He ascended to heaven to prepare a place for us. Meanwhile, let us return the favor by preparing a place for Christ right here in our own lives and in our own hearts.

So, first let's show some sympathy for the stubborn. Let's commiserate with the discouraged who have come to doubt whether they will ever much improve.

You might, for example, have earnestly said Amen to this morning's Prayer of the Day, with its magnificent petition about the "fire of God's love":

Kindle in us the fire of your love, and strengthen our lives for service in your kingdom...

Aye, you might have longed for this petition to come true in your own life. Yet you might have doubted whether it would become true even as you were saying your Amen.

"Preacher," you might say, "I know this old heart of mine, and it's not such a good story. I must have heard a thousand sermons by now, and agreed with nearly all of them, yet here I am, pretty much the same as I always was. I want to do better. I want to *be* better, yet it is with me as it was with the writer of Ecclesiastes long ago:

<sup>9</sup>The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be;  
and that which is done is that which shall be done:  
and there is no new thing under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:9, KJV)

"Alas, that is one passage of scripture that rings true for me. When it comes to this old heart of mine, 'there is no new thing under the sun.'

"In fact, I seem to be so unmovable that I have begun to wonder whether Christ and holiness of life are meant for *me*. Christ is meant for the apostles and for the saints and for the martyrs, I do not doubt that. But I fear that if Christ came to my seaside and bid me to leave my nets and follow him, my poor heart is so stuck in its ways, that I'd probably just go on fishing for fish.

"And then, Preacher, let me mention one more thing. I am depressed. I have been for years, truth be told. I have just been pressing on, putting one foot in front of the other, trying to carry my responsibilities in this world. I have been doing the best I can, and I really do feel that I cannot take another ounce of pressure. Not another ounce, not even pressure toward piety."

In answer to this discouraged one, let me admit that many of these thoughts trouble me too. I mean, not only have I *heard* a thousand sermons, but I have *preached* them! Still, after all that preaching, I'm nothing special in this world. It is the preacher's high privilege to be preoccupied with the Word of God. It is my joy and it is the reason I encourage some of you to consider becoming ordained ministers. Yet for all that high privilege of dwelling on God's Word, I am still nothing special in this life.

How many times have I fallen short of the glory of Christ! Like many of you, at the end of a weary week, I find myself entirely ready to fall down on my knees and to join the great Confession at the start of the liturgy. You probably know the opening words by heart:

- ☐ Most merciful God,
- ☑ we confess that we are *in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves*. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves...

This confession comes readily to my lips. I have not yet known a week in which it did not seem right and natural that I should make such a confession.

So, I understand anyone who doubts whether they have the ability to change. I have entertained such discouraging doubts too.

Furthermore, the answer to such doubts is, You are right! You do not have the ability to come to Christ and to his ways. You are in fact unable to do these good things *if* you are counting on your own abilities, talents, and strength. But I am not talking now about your own strength, but rather about Christ's "power from on high"! I am talking about Pentecost.

And let me hasten to give answer to your fears that Christ is not meant for you, but rather for the apostles, saints, and martyrs. Perhaps you have not yet noticed something distinctive about the ministry of Jesus: he tended to minister to those who were in bondage, either physical or emotional. His heart seemed especially to go out to those who were lame or lepers or blind or bound by demons. It was precisely those who felt themselves to be utterly powerless to spring up and take their pallets and run around with joy whom Jesus loved and to whom he gave the power they did not naturally have.

Let us never forget that Christ said that he came to call sinners, that those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. (Matthew 9:12) Therefore, if you are feeling powerless to change and to draw closer to Christ, you are precisely the one for whom he has special affection and he offers to clothe you with power from on high.

So, let us turn now to *him* and to my second theme: Jesus Christ is our great and holy agent of change.

Let me begin by mentioning that I'm feeling in a romantic mood today. I'm inclined to speak of love today because this day, May 23rd, is the twenty-eighth wedding anniversary for Carol and me.

A few days ago, Carol watched a PBS tribute to Lena Horne.<sup>1</sup> I happened to pass by the television at the point where the tribute was speaking of Lena Horne singing in that great musical *Show Boat*<sup>2</sup>. Think of the kind of love of which she sang in the song, "Can't Help Lovin' That Man."

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<sup>1</sup> Lena Mary Calhoun Horne (June 30, 1917 – May 9, 2010) was an American singer, actress, civil rights activist and dancer. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lena\\_Horne](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lena_Horne)

<sup>2</sup> Oscar Hammerstein - J. Kern

Fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly,  
I gotta love one man 'til I die,  
I can't help lovin' that man of mine.

Now, I'm a lucky guy because for all the world, it does appear to be the case that Carol can sing that second verse about *me*:

Tell me he's lazy, tell me he's slow,  
Tell me I'm crazy, maybe I know,  
But I can't help lovin' that man of mine!

Imagine a love so strong that the singer can say, "I gotta love that man 'til I die." Some loves in this world fall short of that standard. But it is a lovely thing to see a love that is so strong that with a dying breath, a man, a woman, can be thanking for that one who capture the heart so long ago.

But here is something even more wonderful. Christ loves you with a love that exceeds the dying breath!

That is the great point of this morning's Gospel Lesson from John Chapter 14. In that reading, Jesus comforts his disciples with a most extraordinary promise. Heretofore, they had *followed* Jesus. Now, in some measure, they are to *be* Jesus. They are to be him because though he dies and ascends to heaven, he means to send his Spirit to them. His love for them surpasses death! His love forbids him to leave his disciples behind. He means to return to them and take up a dwelling in their lives. He does not mean to leave them as orphans in this world.

And so, Jesus is saying farewell to his disciples, but he is saying farewell in an extraordinary way: he is promising them that he will somehow remain with them, that the Spirit that has been *in him* shall soon be *in them*, and therefore, they shall become this world's best chance to get to know Jesus. The world shall be permitted to know something of Christ by getting to know them!

Things do not always work out that way for the sheep of the flock. When the Shepherd goes away, it does not always work out that the sheep and lambs somehow become shepherd-like. Sometimes, things just fall apart when the Master goes away. The disciples then think back on their time with the Master as being a kind of golden age for them, a time of Camelot, but once the Master departs, they return to their old ways. For "one, brief, shining moment" they were no longer fishers of fish, but fishers of humanity. For "one, brief, shining moment" they were not longer tax collectors, but apostles. Jesus could have said farewell to his disciples in such a way that there was nothing left for Matthew to do but to return to his tax office and nothing for Peter and Andrew to do but return to their fishing nets. But Pentecost signifies something else, something wondrous: these disciples are not to return to their old ways of life but are to step forward into life and into all that the future holds as new persons on this earth -- indeed, as "Christians." They are to be Christ-bearers to the world.

Pentecost is the promise to all people that the kind of life Jesus lived is possible for them too. A key thing about Jesus is that he had a certain *spirit* about him. It was a spirit of gentleness and wisdom, but also a spirit of iron self-discipline and courage. It was a spirit oriented toward the welfare of others. It was a spirit that broke the ego's preoccupation with itself and lifted the eyes and the heart toward a suffering world.

This distinctive spirit of Jesus is one of the first things said *about* Jesus. And it was one of the first things *about which* he spoke. So it is that we read, not simply that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, but also that he ventured out into that wilderness with a certain spirit about him. Listen to how St. Luke puts it:

<sup>1</sup>And Jesus, *full of the Holy Spirit*, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit <sup>2</sup>for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil.  
(Luke 4:1-2a, RSV)

Then, when he returned from the desert and began his public preaching, the first thing he said concerned the Spirit. He said that the Spirit was upon him:

<sup>16</sup>And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day. And he stood up to read; <sup>17</sup>and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, <sup>18</sup>“*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed,* <sup>19</sup>to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” <sup>20</sup>And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup>And he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:16-21, RSV, my emphasis)

Pentecost is Christ's promise that his love for you continues all the way to him sharing his very Spirit with you.

Take this to heart. Apply your name to this promise. As sure as I am preaching to you now, Christ offers his Spirit to *you*. Put him to the test! His love compels him to give you a great gift: something of his Spirit and his power. So, tap that power. Strive toward love and find that you can do it. If it were not for Pentecost, you might fail. But Pentecost means that you can do it.

Hastening on, let me speaking of the *direction* in which we should move in order to be moving with the Spirit, not against it. That direction is Christ himself. Always the appeal of Jesus to his people is the same: “Follow me.”

That is why Martin Luther was led to speak of you and me as “Christs.”  
Extraordinary thought there! That the likes of you and me should become Christ

for others. Luther speaks of this high dignity in his treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*:

Hence, as our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were *a Christ to the other* that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians.

Who then can comprehend the riches and the glory of the Christian life? It can do all things and has all things and lacks nothing. It is lord over sin, death, and hell, and yet at the same time it serves, ministers to, and benefits all men. But alas in our day this life is unknown throughout the world; it is neither preached about nor sought after; we are altogether ignorant of our own name and do not know why we are Christians or bear the name of Christians. Surely we are named after Christ, not because he is absent from us, but because *he dwells in us*, that is, because we believe in him and are Christs one to another and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us. (Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 1520)

Luther's words here about how Christ "dwells in us" leads me to my final point. Last Sunday, we said that Christ ascended to the Father for at two purposes: to carry on his high ministry of intercession for us, daily renewing the prayer he began on Golgotha: "Father, forgive." And secondly, Christ ascended to heaven to prepare a place for us. In his Father's house are many mansions. He goes to prepare a place for us. My closing theme now is that you and I should return the favor: In the time that remains to us in this earthy life, we should prepare a place for Christ in our hearts and in our lives.

In our dining room at the parsonage, we have a simple picture from my parent's home. The artwork is romantic and the saying pious, but I love it all. It is perfect, in my opinion. It goes like this:

Christ is the Head of this House  
The unseen Host at every meal.  
The silent Listener to every conversation.

This saying surrounds a pastel painting of a cottage by a lake with flowers and trees -- the kind of cottage Carol and I would love to retire in someday.

Pentecost means that you and I *should and can* prepare a dwelling for Christ in our lives. We can consider him the host of our meals, the listener to our conversations, the very Shepherd of our souls. We should listen to him as he guides, directs, corrects, and encourages us. We should yield to his holy impulses, to his Holy Spirit, and we should learn not to reckon the cost of holiness of life.

Naturally, we might doubt whether we are up to this high calling. We might doubt our strength, our capacity for change, even whether we are the ones Christ calls. But Pentecost means that we are clothed with a power from on high that some of us have not yet even begun to explore. Baptism is the application of Pentecost to you and to me. Baptism is your sign that Power resides within you, for Christ dwells within you, eager to direct your life evermore in the direction of love, to the benefit of this world and to the glory of his name, to whom belongs glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.