

**The Gifts of Pentecost and Port Williams**  
**Acts 2:1-21**

**Dr. Don Flowers, Jr.**  
**Port Williams United Baptist Church**  
**Final Sermon**

Several years ago I was meeting with a young couple about to get married. As a way of helping them think about things that might be a source of disagreement I asked, *“What is your favorite holiday?”*

I was not surprised when the young woman said, “Christmas,” with all the family gatherings and decorations and dinners. But when it was time for the future groom to answer he said, “Labor Day.”

The bride and I both looked at him with astonishment! Who says Labor Day is their favorite holiday?

He went on to explain that his family always gathered for an end of the summer feast at their lake house, spent time together. It was the one time each year that EVERYONE was expected to attend. No exceptions.

There was some rather intense conversation, but I am happy to announce that they did get married and at last check are still married!

I thought about them this week. It is not an accident that I chose today as my last Sunday to preach as your pastor. Today is one of my favorite Sundays of the year to preach! Today is Pentecost! I didn’t want to miss it!

That may sound bizarre to you. And maybe it is. It isn’t a BIG Sunday like Easter or Christmas. But it is the day when I get to wear my red stole—one of only a couple times every year. It is often called the birthday of the church, and I love this story!

But we have to be honest. The day of Pentecost, the festival of Weeks that was being celebrated was not a big deal in Jewish life. Oh maybe at one time it was. According to Jewish tradition, the Israelites arrived at Mt. Sinai fifty days after leaving Egypt, so the festival of Weeks (Pentecost) came to commemorate the giving of the law.<sup>1</sup>

But today...

In Charleston we had an office manager who was Jewish. It was like having our in-house resident expert. She helped us learn about the work that goes into Passover, (more than you can imagine!) the difference between Hanukkah and Christmas, (a lot!) and about the various holy days in Jewish life. We were in staff meeting once planning Pentecost and I asked about the Festival of Weeks, and she said, “the what?”

It really isn’t a big deal!

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<sup>1</sup> Carl A Volz. [http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/10-2\\_Sex-Intimacy/10-2\\_Volz.pdf](http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/10-2_Sex-Intimacy/10-2_Volz.pdf)

And it wasn't a big deal for me growing up! Pentecost was just a shortened name for that charismatic church on the edge of town. Our church didn't do the church year (I didn't even know that was a thing) so Pentecost was, well, just another Bible story!

But what a story it is! I think it ranks right up there with the flood and the Tower of Babel and Elijah's battle at Mt Carmel—those stories that we aren't quite sure what happened but we know something happened!

Something happened! What, we aren't really sure. Luke gives us different accounts; "It was like a rushing wind;" "There were tongues of fire dancing on everybody's head;" "Suddenly people were talking in all kinds of strange languages." Different stories about what happened, like interviewing people after a tornado. All we know is something happened!

Something happened, and they weren't in on place anymore! They spilled out into the street. They broke out of the room in which they had been meeting. They broke out of the fear that had kept them enslaved. They broke out of the routines and habits that had restricted what they could and couldn't do. On that morning, the spirit was poured out on them and their world broke wide open!

And not just their little world, but the whole world! As you read through the text you get that wonderful-quirky list of nationalities represented. *"Parthians and Medes, Elamites and people of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, Egypt, parts of Libya and Rome, Cretans and Arabs."*<sup>2</sup> Scholars have long tried to make some sense of that list. Some have tried to hold it together spatially, as a geographical configuration from East to West. Others have seen it a a part of the compass, or perhaps even the astronomical signs--all as a way of saying that the Spirit is no longer contained in Jerusalem, but is loose on all the world!

And that is a way of reading the text. And it works...if you ignore the individual ethnic groups mentioned. To put it bluntly, there is no way that group could be together! Take the Medes for instance. They would have had a difficult journey to get to Jerusalem, since they not only would have had to travel several hundred miles, but several hundred years! They disappeared from history about 200 years before Christ! Same thing with the Elamites, who apparently journeyed over to the story from Iran and from the book of Ezra. They had been wiped out by the Assyrians in 640 BCE!

To paraphrase Tom Long, it would be like someone saying to you at Coffee and Conversation, *"You should have been here for worship on Pentecost! We had a huge number of visitors—some from BC, a nice family from Manitoba, and right before worship started we had a van load of Acadians and a wonderful Viking couple who requested envelopes!"*

Something happened!

Church happened! And it has been happening ever since.

It's another one of those turn the world upside-down it is't the way you thought it was events! Like when Jesus said if you want to save your life you will lose it but if you give it away you will find it; like the first shall be last; one of those events.

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:9-11a. NRSV

Most of the time when you are invited to a birthday party you take a gift! Only when the church throws a party, the Holy Spirit passes out the gifts. Paul says:

*Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful:*

*wise counsel  
clear understanding  
simple trust  
healing the sick  
miraculous acts  
proclamation  
distinguishing between spirits  
tongues,  
interpretation of tongues.<sup>3</sup>*

Did you catch that? When you come to the church's party you get the gift!

So what do you say?

As any child knows, the polite and proper thing to say when you are offered a gift, is to say thank you!

You say thank you because you realize it isn't deserved. It is all grace, a gift from God. As Frederich Buechner says, "*Grace is something you can never get but can only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.*"<sup>4</sup>

It is grace.

It was grace that allowed us to come and be with you, and so the appropriate response is thank you!

Several weeks ago Anita asked me, "How has being here changed you?" It is a great question and one that I think will take some time to answer. I have been thinking a lot about it, and while I don't have the answers, I have made a list of the grace, the gifts I have received.

I know my world has been widened. I have learned how provincial I am. Even though I have traveled and pride myself in being a news junkie, the fact is that my world really was confined to a small part of the world. But now?

Now I know that there is a place called Nunavut! (For a while I thought it was one of those jokes people were playing on me to see how gullible this American can be!). I know that no matter how cold I think it is, it is colder in Yellowknife. I know the different directions between Falmouth and Yarmouth, Berwick and Bedford!

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<sup>3</sup>I Corinthians 12:7-10. *The Message*.

<sup>4</sup> Frederich Buechner. <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2018/5/7/grace>

I know how to read kilometers, even though Celsius still confused me, especially when it is below freezing.

I have a new fascination with place names. So many are so musical! Miramachi, Kejimkujik, Stubenacdie.

I have learned a new vocabulary. I had never used whack and “some good” the way we do here!

I have learned that history really does depend on who is telling the story. I knew that. There is a different history between the north and the south in the US, but hearing about the “marauding Americans,” hearing the place where I am living described as a security threat? Learning that there was a “thanksgiving” here nearly a century before the “First” thanksgiving in Plymouth! I have been reminded that the world doesn’t revolve around me, or my country of origin.

I deeply appreciate the diversity of this place. Even though Nova Scotia is whiter than the rest of Canada, we see diversity all around us. Especially when we turn on the news. Anita and I often comment that there are wonderful news anchors who would never have a chance south of the border. Ginella Massa—a hijab wearing anchor? Can’t imagine ever seeing her in the US! Wonderful reporters who don’t fit the “model” routinely appear on our shows. That has stretched me, and for that I am grateful!

I have learned about being in an agricultural area. I grew up in the country, and my uncle had a farm across the street from us where he raised cattle, but it was a hobby. Here I have learned so much. I can now taste the difference between various types of apples. I will never preach on the vine and the branches the same way! This place has changed the way I read the Bible!

More than once Anita and I have commented that it has opened our eyes to the plight of immigrants. This week 300 individuals from Ukraine arrived in Halifax, fleeing the horrific war in their homeland. Just next door Muhammed and Khyria have come here escaping the terror of Syria, Ali and his family are here now, and we just learned that his brother has just been granted his transportation papers and will be arriving in the next few weeks!

Anita and I arrived speaking the language (sorta,) we had a place to live, a job; we had financial resources, and it was the most difficult thing we have ever done! Things we previously took for granted—getting a drivers license, getting cell phone, getting a mortgage were all more difficult than we had imagined! Being a stranger in a strange land is hard. We will never forget that!

One summer while I was in high school I read the book *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, the history of the American west told from an indigenous point of view. It was an eye opening experience. But time dulls our senses. The recent news from Kamloops and so many other residential schools has made me aware that this isn’t ancient history, but a prejudice we constantly need to be aware of, and working to overcome. For once we stop seeing another as a child of God, as a human, no atrocity is beyond being.

These are just a few of the gifts you have shared with me over these years. I have intentionally not named names because I would inevitably left someone out. But know we have been blessed by you, gifted by you.

There is a wonderful song in the musical *Wicked*, in which Glinda the “good Witch” and Elphaba are saying their goodbyes. There is a line from that song that has kept coming up as I have thought about our departure.

The lyrics say simply,

*I've heard it said  
That people come into our lives for a reason  
Bringing something we must learn  
And we are led  
To those who help us most to grow  
If we let them  
And we help them in return  
Well, I don't know if I believe that's true  
But I know I'm who I am today  
Because I knew you  
I do believe I have been changed for the better  
And because I knew you  
I have been changed  
For good<sup>5</sup>*

It is all grace.

Thank you!

We gather today on the edge of summer, with long days, the lupins blooming. Quite a difference from that first day I stood here as your pastor! On that day the snow was still falling, the wind howling, we were all bundled up in our warmest!

But on that day we gathered around this table. So it is fitting that we come around to it again. We do it because in the end it is this story that we remember, but also the times we have gathered, and the people with whom we have gathered.

I recall gathering in my home church in Cherryville, NC where we had communion once a quarter.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.google.com/search?gs\\_ssp=e|zj4tVP1zc0TDLLqKwqSsk2YPSSyVTISCxLVUhKTc1TSM5IzEtPTVFIyy9SSM\\_PTWEASogPCw&q=i+have+been+changed+for+good&oq=I+have+been+cha&aqs=chrome.1.0i355i512j46i512l2j69i57j0i512l3j46i512j0i512l2.8477j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#wptab=s:H4sIAAAAAAAAAAONgVuLVT9c3NEwyy6isKkrJfsRowS3w8sc9YSn9SWtOXmPU5OIKzsgvd80rySypFJLmYoOyBkX4uVB18uxi0ktJTUsszSmJL0lMsspOttLPLS3OTNYvSk3OL0rJzEuPT84pLS5JLbLKqSzKTC5exCqWll-kk|6fn6JQnpmcnZqiAJEAAJkPGt6WAAAA](https://www.google.com/search?gs_ssp=e|zj4tVP1zc0TDLLqKwqSsk2YPSSyVTISCxLVUhKTc1TSM5IzEtPTVFIyy9SSM_PTWEASogPCw&q=i+have+been+changed+for+good&oq=I+have+been+cha&aqs=chrome.1.0i355i512j46i512l2j69i57j0i512l3j46i512j0i512l2.8477j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#wptab=s:H4sIAAAAAAAAAAONgVuLVT9c3NEwyy6isKkrJfsRowS3w8sc9YSn9SWtOXmPU5OIKzsgvd80rySypFJLmYoOyBkX4uVB18uxi0ktJTUsszSmJL0lMsspOttLPLS3OTNYvSk3OL0rJzEuPT84pLS5JLbLKqSzKTC5exCqWll-kk|6fn6JQnpmcnZqiAJEAAJkPGt6WAAAA)

I remember services in Wait Chapel as a college student; on a retreat with friends who are still friends;

Communion on youth retreats with goldfish and Kool Aid.

I remember Christmas Eve communion in Greenville where I tested myself to see how many names I could call.

I remember communion with our family in Westminster Abbey; in Gateway Church in Bali, in a little house church in Beirut.

I remember the places, but even more I remember the faces. And in the years to come I will remember your faces, with gratitude, for you have shown me the face of God.

We remember.