

## **“The Birth of the Bikkurim”**

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

6-9-19 Pentecost Sunday

Based upon Acts 2:1-21; James 1:17-18

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the third-most important high holiday of the liturgical year, the day that Christians have come to think of as the birthday of Church. Remembering how the Holy Spirit arrived in Jerusalem like a great wind on Pentecost, and danced on the disciples' heads like tongues of fire, enabling them to share the Good News in all kinds of languages, some churches mark the day with multilingual worship featuring red and orange paraments. But it is also quite common to recognize the day with balloons, parties, and cake in much the same way that we recognize our own birthdays. Given this, Barbara Brown Taylor wrote in an essay years ago what she imagined it would be like if Jesus actually showed up to one of these celebrations:

“[A]fter everyone got over the shock of seeing Jesus right there in the parish hall,” she wrote, “someone asked him if he would please do them the honor of cutting the cake.”

“Delighted,” Jesus said. “Whose birthday is it, anyway?”

“Well, ours,” someone said, flushing red in the neck. “We're celebrating the first Pentecost.”

“The first Pentecost?” Jesus said, licking icing off his thumb. “When was that?”

“You know,” someone said, thinking she was being teased. “The one Luke wrote about.” Jesus looked up at the ceiling and moved his lips like he was counting.

“That would have been my twenty-first Pentecost if I'd made it,” he said, looking around at all the puzzled faces. “Umm, did anyone ever tell you that Pentecost is a Jewish holiday? See, that's what all of my friends were doing in Jerusalem in the first place. They were there for Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, one of the three great pilgrim festivals of the Jewish year.”<sup>1</sup>

I don't know if it would have been Jesus' twenty-first Pentecost or not. That number assumes he was bar Mitzvah'd at age twelve and died at thirty-three, which no one really knows for sure. But Taylor is right to note in her fantasy the oft-forgotten fact that Pentecost was a Jewish holiday long before it became a Christian one as well; it was an important Jewish holiday too. The more we know about that holiday, moreover, the more meaning our Christian Pentecost can have for us.

*Deuteronomy* 16:16 states that there are three festivals which require all males to make a pilgrimage to “the place of the Lord's choosing” (which came to be the Temple in Jerusalem).

---

<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown, *JOURNAL FOR PREACHERS*, Pentecost 2004, 35-39.

The first holiday is the one we know best, *Peshach* or Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Passover recognizes how God liberated the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt; the Jews were celebrating this in Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified. The third pilgrim holiday is *Succoth*, or the Festival of Booths, a five-day fall harvest festival when faithful Jews make little booths celebrating the harvest and recognizing how God provided manna and quail for their ancestors in the wilderness. The middle one is *Shavuot*, which means Weeks, is celebrated seven weeks after the second day of Passover, the day of the barley harvest. Counted in days, that is 50 days after Passover begins, which is why the holiday is also called Pentecost.<sup>2</sup>

Theologically speaking, the Festival of Weeks, like the other major Jewish holidays, recognized more than one thing. Among the events it celebrates is the day Yahweh gave the Law to the fledgling people of Israel at Mt. Sinai in the wilderness. According to Jewish legend, when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, the words the Lord spoke started as a single sound, yet all the people at the foot of the mountain heard voices in the plural. The voice of the Lord was divided into seven voices, and then seventy tongues, (which reflected the 70 known nations of the world), so that all the nations could hear God's promises and enter into covenant relationship with Yahweh along with Israel.<sup>3</sup> The legend says that only Israel responded. In that moment the people went from being a bunch of rag tag escaped slaves to God's chosen nation.

Needless to say, the legend sounds an awful lot like what happened on Pentecost. After receiving the Word of God through the Spirit, the disciples went from being a rag tag bunch of followers of Jesus of Nazareth, to being God's chosen leaders of a new people. They became the first Church. So, I have preached before on the marvelous symbolic significance of the Holy Spirit arriving on Pentecost of all days, to equip the disciples to carry the good news to all the nations of the world. It was like Sinai part two.

But Pentecost was also Shavuot, a harvest festival during which the people of Israel gave thanks for the *bikkurim*, which were the "first fruits" of seven crops: barley, wheat, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates. On the second day of Passover, there was a ceremony called the "Waving of the Sheaves" when the barley crop was offered up at the Temple. Thereafter, in a ritual called "the Counting of the Omer," faithful Jews were called to count off the days of the calendar for "a week's worth of weeks" or seven weeks, in much the same way we count off days in Advent or Lent. This was a time of spiritual preparation for the Jewish people, which ultimately culminated in the Festival of Weeks, when the wheat crop was finally harvested and all the first fruits could be offered at the Temple. (Ex. 23: 16-17). For the Festival, people paraded into Jerusalem with baskets of their first fruits, gave thanks in the Temple, recited prayers, and read Scripture. Then they feasted on sweet treats like blintzes made of dairy and honey, to commemorate how the Lord gave their ancestors the Promised Land of "milk and honey" as their own. Pentecost was a joyful holiday, a Jewish Thanksgiving of sorts, when the Jews dedicated their first fruits, and their hearts to God, recognized how richly God had blessed them with both the Law and the Land.

---

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Epstein, Morris, *All About Jewish Holidays and Customs*, Rev. Ed. (Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1970).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. *Seventy Languages of the Torah* at <https://galileeegreen.com/seventy-languages-of-torah/>

On the Pentecost when the Holy Spirit transformed the disciples by putting the Word of God on their lips, all of the people were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate this Festival. So, it's not surprising that years later, when James wrote his letter, he put two and two together and equated the birth of the Church that day with the first fruits celebration of Pentecost. Centuries before, the prophet Jeremiah has said as much about the people of Israel, that "Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of his harvest." (Jer. 2:3). Now James argued, the disciples were first fruits of a new harvest, God's new creation in Christ. The disciples were the equivalent of human bikkurim.

Although some scholars have argued that only the very first disciples should be counted as bikkurim, not we who have sprouted in faith so many generations later, most scholars believe that James wasn't being quite so literal with the idea of "first" fruits so as to say only those in Jerusalem that day counted. He was saying that the whole Christian Church is the first fruit of God's new creation. But what does that mean? We know about the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal. 5:22-23). But James wasn't talking about that kind of fruitiness. He was talking about Pentecostal fruitiness in the Shavuot-sense of that term. What does it mean to be the first fruit of God's harvest?

I've been thinking about it all week and come to the conclusion that it means three things. First, to be a first fruit is to be dedicated to God. When it came to raising the crops and livestock that would be their food and their livelihood, the Jews knew that according to the Law, the first-born and the first-grown was marked as God's, not their own. So, when they planted a crop and the first green shoots began to sprout, they would go out and tie reeds around the plants so that later when it came time for harvest, it was clear which plants needed to be offered to God and which they could eat or sell. In similar fashion, when we are baptized into Christ Jesus, we are marked as Christ's own. This doesn't necessarily mean that we have been marked for sacrifice to God, but it does mean that we are designated to be God's in a way that others are not. We have been marked for the purpose of giving glory to God.

You see, the whole rationale behind the first fruit offerings was to remind the people once they lived in the Promised Land and were growing fat and comfortable with their riches, that it was God who gave them the land and God who enabled them to thrive. When they had to set aside the first fruit, it was supposed to be an "ah ha" moment, or more accurately an "ah Yahweh" moment which reawakened them to God's role in their lives as well as God's generosity and grace. If Christians are the first fruits, therefore, then we are the ones who are designated to glorify God so that the world will not forget all that God has done for humanity in Christ. We are the ones who are called like those first disciples to share the good news with the world that they have been saved not through their own efforts, but through God's grace in Christ. We are the ones whose lives are supposed to be dedicated to God's service, so that the world will not forget God.

To that end, the second task of the bikkurim is doxology, thanksgiving. You know the hymn “*For the Fruit of all Creation*”? The first verse goes: “For the fruit of all creation, thanks be to God. For the gifts to every nation, thanks be to God. For the plowing, sowing, reaping, silent growth while we are sleeping, future needs in earth’s safe-keeping thanks be to God.” The last ends “For the wonders that astound us, for the truths that still confound us, most of all that love has found us, thanks be to God.”<sup>44</sup> We are called to sing this message with our lives. In a world which focuses on scarcity, we are called to sing of God’s blessings. In a world which gives us hundreds of reasons to fear each day, we are called to counter with hundreds of reasons to be grateful. This is a kind of evangelism I think we all can get behind, even if the classic Pentecostal message about salvation makes us uncomfortable. With the help of the Spirit, we can easily put thanksgiving on our lips because we all have been blessed so abundantly. Accordingly, I posted on Facebook a few days ago a little Pentecost first fruits challenge. Try to spend the next 50 days naming publicly something for which you are grateful. If we all circulated thanksgiving as much as we circulate anger and anxiety, the world would be a different place.

The last role of first fruit is perhaps the most important. We are to testify with our lives to the reality of the new creation’s birth. Think about what it’s like to plant a crop. Maybe you have already planted seeds for a vegetable garden. You till the soil and get it just right. You plant the seeds carefully, not too shallow, not too deep, and water them faithfully. But for a long time after that nothing happens. It can be hard to believe that you really will have a bumper crop of vegetables someday. But when the first green shoots break the through the soil, then everything changes. You many have weeks or even months still to go before you can sink your teeth in a juicy fresh tomato, but you still have every reason to hope it’s on its way.

We are called to be those first green shoots for a world which says, “Yea right, what new creation? Everything looks like the old one, which is falling apart rapidly, by the way.” In our love for all people, in the way that we help each other, and listen, and share, value truth and justice and mercy we are called to be signs to the world that the new creation has taken hold of the earth and is sprouting. The churchy way of expressing this calling is to say that we are called to be a “provisional demonstration of the kingdom of God on earth.” But that language can confuse as well as illuminate if you don’t know what the kingdom of God on earth is supposed to look like. We all know what plants look like, however. Although we are not an agrarian culture in the suburbs, most of us have planted something and watched it grow. Imagine you are the sprouting lima bean alongside the paper towel in a cup clutched by a child of God, or the annuals lovingly planted by our divine Gardener to make the earth look more beautiful. We are called to be the unfurling leaves that inspire hope in a world that doesn’t have enough of it. The Church has not always done this well. But we can if we try.

The cover image of the bulletin is a scene from a George Clooney movie called *Tomorrowland*.<sup>5</sup> It isn’t the best-crafted movie ever made, but it deserves more attention than it

---

<sup>4</sup> See Hymn 553, *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville: Westminster/John Know Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> *Tomorrowland*, film directed by Brad Bird, released May 22, 2015 (USA).

gets. The movie begins when a young girl, a sort of rebel with the cause of making the world a better place, finds an odd button. When she touches it, it drops her in a wheat field outside of an amazing futuristic city that looks like Oz. The city is a glimpse of the future, and is a place filled with cool technology and peace. But one piece of technology has inadvertently made that future unattainable. A machine broadcasts all of the negative things that are happening in the world. It was supposed to inspire people to fix the problems, but instead it has caused our world to be overwhelmed and filled with despair.

Ultimately, it becomes the responsibility of the rebel girl to destroy that machine and spread a message of hope instead. She succeeds and begins the effort to fix the world's problems by sending out magic buttons to people all around the world—to the creative folk, the dreamers, the scientists, the poets. The movie ends with the scene on the bulletin, all kinds of people standing amidst the wheat, inspired by a not-quite-real future with hope, to use their gifts to make it real. I think it is a beautiful image of what we, God's bikkurim in Christ, are called to do on this day we celebrate both the wheat harvest and the Word. The Holy Spirit has given each of us a button, and with it an opportunity to remind the world about God's blessings and God's plan. Dedicated to this purpose, let us celebrate the first birthday of God's new creation with food and fellowship, and with the rest of our lives. Amen.