

Sermons at St Paul's

The Day of Pentecost

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Recently the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania released a 10-year study about what makes CEOs of major corporations successful. The study showed that four behavioral characteristics marked the most exemplary leaders: they make the decisions they have to make quickly; they are – to quote the study – “relentlessly reliable”; they excel at managing relationships and they adapt swiftly to changing circumstances.

They certainly match what I want in a leader: judgement, reliability, people-smarts and adaptability. But why, I found myself wondering, are none of these ever listed as gifts of the Spirit?

In Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, we get spiritual gifts called the utterance of wisdom and knowledge, faith and healing, the working of miracles and prophecy, and those especially mysterious ones – discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues and the discernment of tongues. Faith and healing, wisdom and knowledge are gifts that we all may have some experience with, but we pretty quickly get in over our heads with the rest – or at least I do.

In fact, I suspect that any one present on that Pentecost morning almost 2,000 years ago, probably was not thinking that these Jesus-followers were exhibiting any of these leadership characteristics. What are you to say, when at 9 am, people who have been hiding and meeting in secret for weeks suddenly come pouring out onto the street? What got into them?

First there was a roaring sound of wind, and then signs of flame – enough to frighten anyone in ancient Jerusalem, where buildings were packed together inside the city walls, and fire was an ever-present danger from open hearths. Then there was the noise of people speaking in babel of languages, all at once. What was going on?

As people ran out to see what was happening, they noticed that a small group of Jesus-followers seemed to be preaching and speaking in every language in the Roman Empire. But that made no sense, since by their dress and habits, they were clearly mostly Galileans. Jews from as far away as Libya and Cyrene to the west, and Parthians to the east, understood what the disciples of Jesus said in their native languages. There was uproar!

Perhaps the most astonishing thing was that Peter, a rough fisherman, seemed to be taking charge and speaking with authority. His voice cut through the crowd, quoting the prophet Joel, as only a famed rabbi might.

The Book of Acts goes on to say, in the rest of Chapter 2, that the authenticity and clarity of the message he preached was astonishing. He recalled King David and his prophecies about the coming Messiah. He named Jesus as Messiah, whom the Romans had killed, and whom God had raised from the dead. Jesus, Peter said, was exalted by his Father into heaven. And in place of Jesus, God now has sent God's Spirit, "who has poured out what you now see and hear." And then Peter promised them that they too, if they repented of their sins, and became baptized in the name of Jesus, would receive the gifts of the Spirit of God. Acts tells us that more than 3,000 people heard his speech, and were later baptized and became Jesus-followers.

Well, perhaps as we note leadership characteristics, we should award Peter high marks for great people relationships and fantastic adapting to changed circumstances. And quick decision-making certainly happened when on-lookers began jeering that the twelve had had too much wine for breakfast – he cut that one off quickly. So we are left with reliability – and that's probably not a word that described what was happening that morning. Peter, 53 days after the crowing of the cock, was not likely to get an A for reliability. Yet as the years wore on, Peter, the Rock, became known for all the CEO characteristics – including reliability

Reliability is surely a gift of God's Spirit. It is most evident under the strain of tough times. When we wonder how we will maintain an optimistic attitude during family crises, or how we will show up one more time in a circumstance that tries our patience to the bone, we are left wondering about our own reliability. When we agonize over how we can answer a need that seems past our ability to meet, or how we can keep going for

one more day through illness or trouble, we are asking about our reliability. It is in the moment when we whisper a prayer for help, because we are beyond our own strength, that God's Spirit comes to us.

We are given the words to say, the strength to keep going, and often the insight to see a different and better outcome. We find ourselves able to comfort and help those in trouble, and offer healing and solace to others. That is God's Spirit, our Comforter and our companion, just as Jesus promised. You see, we Christians do not "go it alone." There is always God's Spirit to aid and assist us in God's work.

And so we are seen by others as reliable, even though we may see ourselves as weak and flawed. In some wonderful way, we find that when we pray for help, we find it – often in the strangest ways and in the oddest places. Help shows up. The words come. Then, as at Pentecost, we speak in tongues of humble kindness and love, which are understood by everyone in every corner of the earth.

Yes, the gifts of Pentecost may sound strange at first. But gifts are given through our baptism and confirmation, through our Eucharist and our prayer. They are given and given and given – to us. They are given to make us reliable Christians, leaders in bringing God's love to every nation on earth -- and especially now to our own nation.

That first Pentecost burst on the scene in the crowded streets of Jerusalem, and it is carried forward day-by-day by us. Here at St. Paul's, as Cliff's recent letter to us said, we see it in faithful stewardship, generous participation, service to the world and invitations to come have fun together. We will shortly honor the leadership of our church school teachers, who have reliably, adaptively and with great grace, helped our children and youth grow into an understanding of God's Spirit of love this past year.

Yes, the gifts are given for service, and we are sent into God's world to share what we have received ourselves. Perhaps that is why we can, despite our own failings and shortcomings, know that with God's Spirit at our side, we too can say with Jesus: Peace be with you. As the Father sends me, so I send you!

AMEN.