

Pentecost – June 11-12, 2011
Acts 2:1-12; John 20:19-23

While our calendar year ends in December, for many, this time is the end of a year, with the school year coming to completion. Just a few weeks ago Christ Church Preschool celebrated its end of the year graduating 1/3 of the school onto kindergarten. There are so many graduations over the next several days in Richmond, Broad Street downtown is scheduled to be closed, to host the crowds in the Siegel Center. Here with Christ Church we're excited to honor more than 30 graduating seniors today. Congratulations on a journey well done, seniors. We love you and we're very proud of you.

So, along with the Christmas season, I imagine this time of year is a big gift giving season.

Another huge gift giving time of the year is our birthday, right? Well, along with graduation celebrations, of which Christ Church has many, we celebrate birthdays also, and are grateful for gifts given. Each week you'll notice in your bulletin, those celebrating their birthdays. We give thanks that God has born these people into our lives to share their God given gifts, and we pray for God's blessing upon them as they grow in wisdom and grace.

This weekend, we celebrate a huge birthday; the birthday of the church, with the feast of Pentecost. Our Book of Common Prayer, from which we worship, lists Pentecost as one of those Principal days in the life of the church, along with Christmas, Easter, Ascension Day, Trinity Sunday, All Saints and Epiphany; those days where we recognize the pivotal turning points in the life of Jesus Christ, given to us.

Pentecost means fifty. Throughout history the Israelites came to associate Pentecost with those covenant promises that marked their identity: the covenant between God and Noah with the promise of new world order; the fifty days following the Passover Feast, when Moses received the Law at Mount Sinai. And when Jews gathered for the agricultural festival known as the Feast of Weeks to give thanks to God for the first fruits of the wheat harvest. By the time Luke writes the book, Acts of the Apostles, Pentecost marks the fifty days following Easter when, Jesus' followers are baptized with the gift of the Holy Spirit, as prophesied by Jesus as the new covenant.

We remember at Jesus' Ascension, he told his disciples to wait for God's gift of the Holy Spirit. They're to stay put. You know how it is with our prayers. The answer might be yes, or no, or wait. So it is with the disciples. Hunkered down, sustained in prayer, they wait. Then, in a sound so roaring, only peals of thunder and a trumpet blast can compare; a noise so great as a mighty wind strong enough to split the mountains in two; a breath of mercy breathing life upon us comes in a spinning whirlwind; the promise of the Holy Spirit. And, just to insure the gift, the Spirit, in the shape of tongues of fire descends upon the apostles.

God makes God's presence known to us in something called theophanies, those sights and sounds that are inexplicably God. Fire is a typical theophany. Moses encounters God in the burning bush that does not burn; in the pillar of fire to lead the Israelites from bondage; and in the mountaintop fire as he receives the Torah. Elijah ascends into heaven in a chariot of fire. John the Baptist prophesies that Jesus will baptize with purifying inflaming of the Holy Spirit. God comes, surrounding us, encompassing, startling and amazing us; firing us up with his Spirit, equipping us with his presence, gifting us with his abundant love, to do great things.

Once baptized by the Holy Spirit, the disciples, are called into action. They begin speaking, all at once, in different languages and yet, all are heard. All are understood. The power of Jesus' Spirit outfits us mightily with new life, healing power, God's favor, forgiveness, courage, hope that makes all things new. When Jesus told us he would be with us to the end of the ages, this is what he meant: the gift of the Holy Spirit would unite us one to another, link us up, with Jesus, to use the gifts, given from him, and to do his work in the world, as the Church.

We celebrate and give thanks for the gift of the Spirit in the birth of the Church. At 9:00 a.m. worship this morning we welcomed the newest members receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit through Baptism: Eleanor Rose Coleman, Frederick Jacob Coleman, Lucas Marshall Hubbard and Reece Michael McAuliffe are now washed, in the forgiveness of sins, marked and sealed as Christ's own forever, ignited to grow in God's grace as witness of Jesus' love, faith and hope. And for this we give great thanks.

So, today, as we rejoice as the Church, and remember our own baptism, I'd like to talk with you about the power of the Spirit calling each and every one of us to use our gifts.

A week ago Thursday we returned from mission in South Sudan. First, let me say, thank you, thank you, thank you for your constant support in thought, word and deed. Please know what a difference your prayers made. Your prayers and support surrounded us with the protective care of God's Spirit. We're forever grateful.

Most of our time in South Sudan was spent with the students and teachers of Hope and Resurrection Secondary School, the school you have helped build. As you know, South Sudan voted for its independence in January. On July 9th South Sudan officially will become Africa's 54th country. After generations of unrest, they are faced with many challenges. And, Hope and Resurrection Secondary School is preparing students to meet these challenges.

There are three things to know about Hope and Resurrection Secondary School in the new South Sudan: it is the finest Secondary School in the region; it is forming leaders for a new, independent South Sudan; and third, Hope and Resurrection is changing the culture of South Sudan educating young women. Let me tell you some stories of Hope and Resurrection Secondary School and why they need our help.

Hope and Resurrection is considered the finest secondary school in the region. Fellow villagers find hope in their daily comings and goings, as they greet the students along their way to school wearing with pride handsome charcoal grey and powder blue uniforms. Word has already traveled throughout the region that these students are studying a full syllabus of arts and sciences, taught daily in eight classes by highly qualified teachers. The students attending Hope and Resurrection Secondary School are seen as a voice of authority in their neighborhoods. The community knows they're willing to make a sacrifice in serving as champions of challenge with their studies.

One young student, Gabriel, has matured as a student. Gabriel, at 29 years old is married, with four small children. He's faithful in following God and has been raised up in his village of Akot, as a leader in the Episcopal Church where he serves as a pastor. In an effort to bring the gospel to all in his path, Gabriel recognized his limitations early on in his ministry and asked to matriculate at Hope and Resurrection at its beginning, four years ago. Christ Church supports Gabriel. Initially, Gabriel struggled to make the commitment to his studies. With all his obligations to his church, his family and his community, he let his studies slide. He was asked to repeat a year. Rather than accept defeat, Gabriel recommitted, recognizing that to improve, sacrifices must be made. He redirected his leadership role at church, recruiting deacons and guest preachers to help with worship. At times his wife and children return to her hometown of Rumbek, in an effort to give Gabriel more study time. "I am committed to my studies," says Gabriel. In a message from him this past week, Gabriel asked us to pray for him and his classmates as they begin mid term exams next week. Gabriel has made some significant sacrifices for his studies, not unnoticed. He has gained the admiration and respect of his fellow classmates, his community and his church.

In this tiny pocket of South Sudan with a culture of violence and war, Hope and Resurrection is raising up leaders for the future. Students are learning a new skill: the art of conflict resolution and negotiating. Each Thursday, all 204 students gather under the pavilion (built by Christ Church) for the last class of the day: debate. During our visit, the motion put forth for debate was entitled, "Mixed Sex Schools Are Better Than Single Sex Schools". It was crowded and hot under that pavilion when we started. As the students got going, the temperature rose. One young man argued from Luke's gospel. "When we are together," he said, "men and women, will produce a greater harvest than when we are separate." Another male student stated that "the women are the wise people...because when there is a quarrel...the mother is more understanding, and the father is the one without listening. Men need to learn forgiveness from the women," he said. Despite the fact that Hope and Resurrection is a successfully mixed sex school, those arguing for Single Sex won the debate proving that these young people serve as independent, clear headed, educated agents for change. Mary and Martha, two leaders in the school reminded us, "change is coming to South Sudan. It will be different. Not with our parents. But in our generation. "

Each day Hope and Resurrection School begins with worship. In fact, they have been in *The Big Read*, studying the gospel of Luke, just like Christ Church, in their classes and in

worship. Worship in Sudan is only complete with song. Each day students chant glorious Dinka tunes and faithfully stand at attention singing their school song, written by our own Keith Tan. As you know, one quarter of the student population is young women. One morning in worship a group of young women came forward to lead us in song. Together they taught us a tune they created: “A Girl Child Can Do What a Boy Child Can Do,...If Only Given A Chance.” There is an saying in Africa, “*if you educate a man, you simply educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation.*”

Martha is one of nine siblings, four brothers and four sisters. As the oldest of the girls, she is responsible for the chores: fetching water, washing clothes, cooking cleaning. In Martha’s words, she does whatever “the home office” tells her to do. Martha’s classmate, Mary is also the oldest of the girls, one of eight siblings, five brothers and two sisters. As the oldest, chores are girl’s responsibility and to disobey results in severe punishment. Because chores are a plenty, there’s no time for studies once at home. So, the girls arise before the break of day, and walk (what the Dinka call “footing”) in the dark, the many hours to school arriving as the sun rises, to prepare for class in the only available light. Right now, the girls are especially challenged because it’s the cultivating season. The oldest daughter is required to cultivate. If they do not cultivate, they do not eat. If they do not eat, they go hungry. Hunger slows the brain, and weakens the body, and impairs the Spirit.

Of the eight hundred million illiterate in the world, two thirds are women. But, not for Martha and Mary. Once on the campus of Hope and Resurrection, Martha and Mary are protected from the abusive demands of their culture. Family members are not likely to come pounding on the gates of the school demanding the girls return home to do chores. The school is so highly regarded, that quality education, especially for girls, trumps all else. “A girl child can do what a boy child can do...if only given a chance.”

When the students of Hope and Resurrection were asked what they would like Christ Church to know about them, they said, “greetings and thanksgiving,...we hope you will continue to provide support.” They need our help. Please, take time to talk with members of the mission team, Elizabeth Bolin, John Snuggs, Nancy Coles and Jennifer and Darryl Ernst, following worship to learn how you can help. Take a look at the insert in your bulletin and consider helping. A little goes a long way.

One former United States president said the following, “*my faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I am, whenever I can, for as long as I can with whatever I have to try to make a difference.*” (Jimmy Carter; Stearn, Richard, [A Hole in the Gospel](#) p. 263). The teachers of Hope and Resurrection Secondary School, leave their families behind, travel untold miles from Uganda to Atiabe South Sudan to do whatever they can, sharing their gifts to make a difference. These teachers, these students, you and me, may we make our *life a mission, not an intermission*; not serving out of charity, but serving because it is the just and right thing to do in caring for the body of Christ as Christians in the world. This is the promise of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus instructs, “the kingdom of God is within you,” and commands, “you will be my witnesses to the earth’s remotest end.” The Spirit is Jesus’ power within us to be the church in the world. Together, our young friends in Sudan are making choices, to use their gifts, growing strong in the Spirit, to change their world, making it a better place despite lack of transportation, limited time for study, overwhelming family obligations, cultural barriers and lack of nutrition. They charge forward, strong in the Spirit, grateful for how God gifts and empowers. So must we.

Congregation, bear with me if you will. I’d like to talk with these fine graduating seniors for just a moment.

The Spirit’s roaring wind and flaming tongues of fire is about living in the freedom of Jesus Christ abiding within us, readying us to be active agents in creating God’s world; a world of equality and fairness; a world where none hunger or thirst, where education is available to all and all know the victory of peace, not war. We may not all be called to travel to South Sudan to serve. But, Jesus does call each and every one of us to serve wherever the path may land us. Seniors, you’ve grown in a world of abundant privilege. You’ve benefited from many advantages. You’re equipped with well trained minds, hearts that know the fulfillment of love, strong bodies and adventurous spirits. You’re beautiful and handsome and brilliant and delightful.

Soon, you’ll be away, continuing to be all God calls you to be in the world. There will be many choices before you; many paths to travel with all kinds of destinations. Choose paths of boldness. Don’t hold back. Be heroic in your faith. Practice truth, honesty and courage. Make a difference. Someone once said, “*sometimes I would like to ask God why He allows poverty, suffering, and injustice when He could do something about it.*” “*Well, why don’t you ask Him?*” was a response. “*Because*”, said the doubter, “*I’m afraid He would ask me the same question.*” My friends, May God bless you with a restless discomfort, with holy anger at injustice and oppression, and exploitation of people so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom and peace; may God bless you with the gift of mercy that you may reach out your hand to comfort, transforming pain into joy; may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in the world, so that you are able, with God’s grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

Receive the Holy Spirit, Jesus says. Marvel at the power of God working within us and rejoice in his glory to fill us with such ability, such determination and such passion to love so deeply and care so much about being the Church in the world. Believe, and go, Jesus is sending us.