

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**May 31, 2009**  
**Acts 2:41-47**  
**The Gift of Pentecost (Part 2)**

I want to name the things we typically associate with Pentecost and have you visualize putting them into a large, cardboard box. Ready? Pentecost, as described in the book of Acts, included a rushing wind and tongues of fire. It had crowds of people, disciples speaking in other languages and the apostle Peter giving his first sermon. Pentecost is all those things. So put them into a box, close the lid and tape it shut, just for now. We're going to talk about Pentecost without talking about any of those things and still get at the heart of why this day is so special in the life of the church.

I call this sermon "The Gift of Pentecost (Part 2)." Part 1 was the message I gave on Easter, titled "The Gift of Easter." In that sermon, I spoke about how the true value of gifts only becomes real when the gift is given away and accepted by someone else. You can tell someone how much the gift cost; you can even tape the receipt to the top of the box, if you want to. But a gift's true worth is only discovered in the act of giving it away.<sup>1</sup> And when a gift passes from one pair of hands to another, it embodies a spirit – a literal spirit of generosity or gratitude. This spirit of the initial gift is kept alive when the gift-recipient chooses to give a gift to someone else. The spirit of the initial gift is destroyed when the gift becomes something hoarded or treated like a possession.

Gifts need to keep moving. They are meant to spread out in ever-widening circles of generosity. Easter is a great example of this. When the fullness of God became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, that was a tremendous gift. All that we need to know about God and God's love is shown to us in the teachings and sacrificial death of Jesus, all of which we neither deserve nor earn, but which is freely given to us like a gift. But the full worth of this gift was best understood on Easter, when Jesus Christ rose from the dead. On that Easter day the disciples' eyes were opened, the women were told that the very person they had come to anoint with burial spices was now alive; on that day they understood how precious a gift they had been given.

What did they do next? In the spirit of true gift-giving, the gift was shared with others. The women raced from the tomb to tell Peter and the others. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus ran back to Jerusalem to say how they had seen the risen Lord. The gift of the gospel – that the kingdom of God is in our midst; that Christ has risen from the grave; and that we are loved with a unconquerable love – that gift was now freely given to others. It wasn't hoarded away or buried in a chest. It wasn't auctioned off to the highest bidder or packaged so it could be sold for a profit. No, it was a gift opened on Easter that has been freely given away ever since. That's Part 1.

All this talk about gifts, though, runs the risk of sounding simplistic. It is a feel-good topic that is totally uncontroversial. I can stand up here and exhort you to pass on the gift of the gospel while behind me the choir softly sings "Kum Ba Yah" and you'd leave here

with a smile on your faces. But there is something deeper at stake here, something that challenges much of the popular wisdom of our American daily lives.

There is a crucial difference between gifts and commodities. Gifts establish an emotional bond between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no true connection. You go into Home Depot, pay the teller for a box of nails and you leave. You may likely never see that person again. This lack of connection is part of the attraction of commodities. We want a box of nails; we don't want to hear about the clerk's family vacation. We may even choose the self-checkout lane for that very reason. We want to buy what we need with a minimum of social entanglement.<sup>2</sup>

In America, this commodity lifestyle is celebrated as proof of our advanced development and national freedom. We're proudly told we can do with our lives whatever we want and do so without messy entanglements. Get a box of nails and lumber and build your own dream house. Use your credit card and book a flight to Caribbean beaches or Alaskan wildernesses. No need to explain to anyone. You're a free agent in the game of life – what could be better?

Now picture this: You're on an airplane and the person seated next to you pulls out a pack of gum or a roll of Lifesavers and offers you one. You accept the little gift and a spirit of goodwill now exists between you; a small emotional connection has been established. In France, some restaurants have long communal tables with modest bottles of house wine set before each plate. Before the meal begins, it is polite to pour your wine not into your own glass but to offer it and pour it first into your neighbor's glass. In so doing, a bond is established with someone who before that was simply a stranger. One more example: When I was studying music in Salzburg, my parents came to visit and we went to a local restaurant that had long, communal tables. We ordered two servings of a famous whipped meringue dessert, but when they arrived, the portions were far too large for us to finish alone. My Dad, always anxious to help others, had me scoop out a portion and give it to a man seated by himself at the end of our table, who smiled and gratefully ate the dessert that he would likely never order just for himself.

Gifts establish an emotional bond between people; commodities downplay the connections between people. The spirit of gift-giving builds up a group into a community; the spirit of commodity-buying fragments groups into anonymous consumers and thereby undermines community. America has evolved primarily into a commodity-driven society, where everything has a price but little of it touches our heart. By contrast, the church is by definition a gift-giving society, where everything has value because it entangles us with others on a heart-felt level. The gift of Pentecost is that through the power of the Holy Spirit a model of gift-giving community was set as the norm for all people of faith. That is likely the most counter-cultural thing you will hear today.

I've mentioned the things associated with Pentecost – the wind and flames and miraculous speech in foreign languages – but we've packed all those items in our cardboard box. At the end of Peter's sermon, he concluded, "Jesus Christ, the crucified one, has been raised from the dead! God has come to us that we might not live afraid,

lost in sin, and broken in spirit.” We’re told that about 3000 people accepted the message, the gift, he gave to them. What did they do next?

Vs. 42 – *“They devoted themselves to teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer.”* Community-building actions, every one of them. Teaching – dialogue and sharing about the gospel of Christ. Fellowship – koinonia; not the impassive purchasing of a box of nails from a nameless clerk, but the conversation and laughter shared between friends. Breaking of bread – a meal around a common table; a time of fellowship that is a true communion with Christ as the host. And prayers – the opening up about what is on our hearts so that we can be connected through petitions to God and heartfelt sentiments with one another. From a cluster of scared disciples in an upper room to a church blown by the Spirit to teach, pray and have fellowship out in that world. That is what Pentecost set loose.

That is the conscious choice Pentecost sets before us: Commodity-lifestyles that fragment or Gift-giving lifestyles that connect and enliven? The artists whose work graces our building today embody the spirit of gift-giving, for art in its purest form is meant to be freely enjoyed and to connect us with the beauty of God’s creation all around us. To them – musicians, artists, poets – I say “thank you.” And to our confirmation students, the seven young people about to be admitted into this fellowship of faith, I say “Prepare yourselves.” Prepare yourselves to receive a gift that is different from anything this world will offer you. Too often society will tell you to be free, to go it alone, to calculate the price of your dreams and go forth to buy it. But this commodity-model will always leave you lonely and fragmented in body and spirit.

The gift of Pentecost is as simple as the person offering you a piece of candy as you sit together on a plane, a glass of wine poured from a shared bottle at a meal, a gift handed over with a smile and no gift receipts – they share a spirit that connects and builds a community of grace and kindness that, with Christ, can sustain and provide you with true, abundant life.

The other option can destroy you. I cannot speak strongly enough against a commodity model of life, even though it is promoted all around you in T.V. commercials and Internet pop-up ads, on glossy magazine covers and flyers stuffed in your mailboxes. On this day, I can only offer you the gift of a plain cardboard box sealed shut with tape. Open it! It’s full of wind and flames, crowds of people hungry to hear a kind word in a language they can understand on a heart-level – a word about resurrection, a word about hope, a word that both describes and creates community. That’s the gift of Pentecost. Pass it on!

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this conversation about gifts and commodities derives from Lewis Hyde’s book, [The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World](#); Vintage Books, 1979, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> For this section, see Lewis Hyde, [The Gift](#), pp. 72-73, 87-88.