

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Sunday, June 5, 2022

The Rev Dr Scott Couper

“Ask God”

Christian Scripture: John 14:8-17, (25-27)



Friends, Pentecost is the birthday of the Christian church and we recognize this special day like we do our own birthdays: we look-back at our past and we give thanks, we celebrate and enjoy our present fellowship together (as we will at our church picnic this afternoon), and we look forward in faith as we anticipate a bright hoped-for future!

Today on Pentecost, we look back on that incredible day described in the book of Acts (2:1-47) when the Holy Spirit descended upon three-thousand as they came to a life of faith.

Because today is a celebration, I am going to uncharacteristically begin my message with some humor. But, it is not just *any* humor – it’s humor about

evangelism – the act of proclaiming the ‘good news’ that began in earnest on that Pentecost day so long ago.

A priest, a Pentecostal preacher, and a rabbi all served as chaplains to the students of Northern Michigan University in Marquette. They would get together two or three times a week for coffee and talk shop. One day, someone made the comment that preaching *to people* isn't really all that hard. *A real challenge* would be to preach to **a bear**. One thing led to another and they decided to do an experiment. They would all go out into the woods, find a bear, preach to it, and attempt to convert it. Seven days later, they're all together to discuss the experience. Father Flannery, who has his arm in a sling, is on crutches, and has various bandages on his body and limbs, goes first. "Well," he says, "I went into the woods to find me a bear. And when I found him I began to read to him from the Catechism. Well, that bear wanted nothing to do with me and roughed me up a bit. So, I quickly grabbed my holy water, sprinkled him and, Holy Mary Mother of God, he became as gentle a lamb. The bishop is coming out next week to give him first communion and confirmation." Now, Reverend Billy Bob spoke next. He was in a wheelchair, with an arm and both legs in casts, and had an IV drip. In his best fire and brimstone oratory he claimed, "Well brothers, I went out and I FOUND me a bear. And you KNOW that we don't sprinkle! I began by reading to my bear from God's HOLY WORD! But that bear wanted nothing to do with me. So, I took hold of

him and we began to wrestle. We wrestled down one hill, up another, and down another until we came to a creek. So, I quick dunked him and baptized his hairy soul. And, just like you said, Father, he became as gentle as a lamb. We spent the rest of the day praising Jesus." They both looked down at the rabbi, who was lying in a hospital bed. He was in a body cast and traction with IVs and monitors running in and out of him. He was in bad shape. The rabbi looks-up and says, "Looking back on it, circumcision may not have been the best way to start."¹

Friends, I know this is a very difficult time to celebrate the church's birthday. First of all, it's difficult because, well, let us be honest, just like in our own pasts, the church has not gotten everything right. In fact, historically speaking, the wider church has gotten much wrong. Historically, the church sanctioned slavery and the discrimination of people of color. The church has in the past, and still to a large extent, marginalizes women. And today, as we celebrate Pride Month as an Open and Affirming congregation, we acknowledge that the church still finds it excruciating difficult to live-out Jesus' ethic of radical inclusion and hospitality to those who society casts-out. Second, today we also struggle as the church in America to find our footing without privilege and succor from the culture and government. We are actually dependent on our own message and demonstration

¹ Adapted from "Pentecost Jokes", found at: <https://upjoke.com/peYou%20may%20ask%20me%20for%20anything%20in%20my%20name,%20and%20I%20will%20do%20it.ntecost-jokes>, accessed June 5, 2022.

of it! And third, the wider church and our own local church struggles with difficult circumstances in the wake of the COVID pandemic.

Despite the difficulties we face, I have great faith in the wider and this particular church, Centre Congregational Church, in downtown Brattleboro. We have a core group of dedicated members and friends whose commitment to the church exceeds even those who gathered on Pentecost. We have existing long-serving ministries such as Loaves & Fishes, Brattleboro Centre for Children, and *Luz del Mundo* that have stood the test of time! We have new ministries such as our hospitality to the Afghan and Muslim community, The Green at Centre, and Pub Theology. And there are greater things yet to come for this church! I am confident of it! I am confident because I listened carefully to the scripture Roger Miller shared with us.

Today's scripture did not tell of the day of Pentecost, but rather of the time Jesus assured his disciples that after he departs, the day will come and the Holy Spirit would infuse within them meaning, purpose, strength, and success. But Jesus went beyond this! If you listened carefully you heard that Jesus said something that to me, to my ears, almost sounds down right heretical! Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do **even greater things than these**" (John 14:12). Huh. Jesus told his friends, they will *exceed* him in their accomplishments. Huh. And Jesus

was not wrong. Peter and Paul's accomplishments (among many others such as the woman at the well, Priscilla, and Lydia), their founding and spreading of the church, was a Herculean accomplishment! Jesus was accurate in his humility – Jesus never even left the Holy Land. So, if Jesus was right about us exceeding his works, how much more right will he be about the second thing he said? Jesus said, "And I will do whatever you ask in my name [...]. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:13-14)?

Friends in Christ, do not doubt the future of the wider Christian church. Jesus promised that we will exceed his accomplishments! Read the text yourselves and tell me my assurance is an exercise in homiletic hyperbole. Jesus said 'we will do greater works than he'! Do not doubt the future of Centre Congregational Church. For if we, if we genuinely and earnestly, if we genuinely and earnestly what?? If we **Ask God**, we will succeed. If we genuinely and earnestly ask God to revive our church, God will, because the Spirit of evangelism will be in you. Your prayer will be answered as you proclaim and demonstrate, the good news of Jesus Christ – that advocates for justice and offers radical inclusion of all into God's realm.

This was the word of God. And it was preached to the people of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen".