

Pentecost & Confirmation Sunday
Eden United Church of Christ, Hayward, California
Sunday, May 23, 2010
The Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 2 (NRSV)

Introduction: The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

Today we join Christians around the world in celebrating Pentecost, one of the “high holy days” of our faith tradition. Our celebration of Pentecost commemorates the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out on the early apostles who founded the Christian Church. Some think of Pentecost as the birthday of the church.

Christian celebrations of Pentecost are grounded in the Ancient Hebrew’s feast of Shavuot, which commemorates God’s gift of Torah to our ancestors. According to Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 2, the earliest apostles (who were all Jews) were in Jerusalem for the feast of Shavuot, fifty days after the first Easter, and were trying to discern God’s purposes for their lives, now that Jesus no longer walked the earth.

The apostles’ discernment process led them to pray and worship, teach and learn, care for themselves and their neighbors, fellowship with each other and invite others to be part of their community.

The story of Pentecost is a peculiar story to post-modern minds like ours, with its grounding in an ancient harvest festival, the apostles’ speaking in tongues, and Peter’s quotation of an Old Testament prophecy from Joel about the young and old dreaming dreams and seeing visions.

Most biblical scholars say, as I do, that Acts 2 is less of an “historical description” of the events that took place at the first Pentecost in Jerusalem, and more of a “theological description” of how the first apostles understood their callings, and the beliefs and hopes that inspired them to found the Christian church.

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Our Confirmation curriculum at Eden Church is based on Acts 2, particularly the last six verses in chapter 2, verses 42-47, which follow the reading that Kern and Becca shared today. Here, Luke describes the mission of the Christian Church this way:

[The first Christians] devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day

by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

If we were all fluent in Greek, we would discover in these verses four core concepts or gifts of the spirit, which were given to the early church. These gifts include: *liturgia*, *kononia*, *kerygma*, and *diakonia*. Each of these gifts has a particular expression within the church, and each has an expression in the wider community.

A copy of the Confirmation schedule is posted on the wall in Oliver Hall today, if you are interested in the details of our curriculum. There you'll see a matrix summarizing how our program provides participants with experiences of every aspect of the church's mission.

Confirmation began last summer with *kononia*, with covenant building among students, parents, and advisors. We strengthened our friendship within our class through study, fellowship, service, and worship, and through the Confirmation overnight held last November, and through participation in the NCNC UCC youth at Confirmation Camp in March.

We walked the labyrinth at the overnight, as a symbolic reminder that faith is a journey and that we go together. Throughout our program, we explored a variety of worship and prayer practices (*liturgia*). Some of these practices were as ancient as the labyrinth and as traditional as the sacraments, while others were as current as singing 21st century praise songs on Mother's Day and today, and as practical as decorating (and undecorating) the Sanctuary and Pioneer Chapel for Advent, Christmas, Lent, and stuffing the worship bulletins for today's worship service.

Since worship is central to our life as Christians, Eden's Confirmation program emphasized worship participation and leadership. During the last nine months, our confirmands served as greeters, ushers, acolytes, liturgists, and musicians for regular and holiday services, including Christmas Eve, Holy Week, and today's Pentecost celebration. They assisted with worship on the first Sunday of every month. And they were the Youth Choir who performed in worship on Mother's Day, and are singing with the Eden Chancel Choir today.

Confirmation also included study of the Word (*kerygma*). Together, at our Confirmation overnight and at Confirmation Camp, we learned about the major historical events behind the Biblical narrative, and the several literary forms that are found within the Bible. Our confirmands also taught church school on Mother's Day. Their lesson, which was based on Jesus' imperative, "Let the little children come to me," included putting on skit for the younger kids, and helping them with an art project.

Our confirmands also read and reflected on the historic creeds of the Christian faith, and expressed our own beliefs through the arts, at Confirmation camp.

Our class supported the work of the E-Team by helping to host the Animal Blessing last October, distributing welcome gifts on Christmas Eve, and preparing for and leading the last Inquirers' Gathering, and welcoming Margie Sara into our membership on May 9.

Our confirmands have also served as deacons of the church (*diakonia*). They worked together on numerous projects, including singing Christmas carols and visiting with residents at Eden Villa in December, and raising money to participate in Confirmation Camp by hosting a Sunday brunch at the end of January.

At our very last Confirmation class on Friday night, each of the students completed a membership application and made a commitment to Eden Church by pledging their Time and Talent in support of the church's mission.

As a sign of the ongoing revelation of the Holy Spirit, we'll hear from three members of the 2010-2011 Confirmation Class regarding their views about the meaning of and the importance of being part of the church. Our first faith reflection will be offered by Jaime Romero, Jr., the second by Ryan Miller, and the third by Sage Fields Tyler.

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Faith Reflection I: Jaime Romero, Jr.

My name is Jaime Romero, Jr. I'm a freshman at Bishop O'Dowd High School in Oakland. My parents are Celia and Jaime, Sr. Romero.

Church has given me something to believe in, and has provided me with guidance. Through my involvement in church, I have come to understand and learn good moral values. For example, I have learned what God wants us to do (and not do).

I've learned that our Christian faith is derived from the Jewish faith tradition. I've learned the Ten Commandments. I've learned the importance of the Golden Rule, which is to treat others as you would like to be treated. I have also learned some Bible stories, and know that I have a lot more to learn. And I've learned to treat others with respect.

Church has also been an important place for me to meet new people, and make new friends.

Through my experiences at church, I've also developed a positive world view and learned spiritual practices that give me a sense of peace, and help me feel good about myself. I have found that through prayer and being at church that I feel calmer and safer. I've learned to put my trust and faith in God. When I pray, I feel close to God. I know that He is listening, and I feel united with Him.

Faith Reflection II: Ryan Miller

My name is Ryan Miller. I'm a freshman at Castro Valley High School. My parents are Jenifer and Russ Miller.

I have discovered that church is where most of your friends are. It's where you feel part of the community, where people love you more than people at school, and where you belong more.

Recently, I learned that some of my best friends at school have grandparents who are members of our choir, Betty and Dan Livesay, and whose mom, Kristen Norman, played the piano and organ for us when Loris was on vacation last month. It's a small world.

My best friends are the people in my confirmation class and church school classes. They are the people I can trust more than others, and with whom I can show some of my feelings about daily life.

One of the things that I appreciate about being part of Eden Church is that this is a community where people accept you as you are, and where no one forces you to have particular beliefs.

Church has also been, for me, a place where I can express my faith through the visual and performing arts. For the past two years, I have sung in the Eden Church choir. I'm the youngest person in the choir, but everyone includes me just the same.

I especially liked being part of the choir this past year when we sang our benefit Christmas concert for FESCO. That was fun. I'm learning a lot about music from Lee. His direction is helping me with the music that I'm learning and performing at school. He provides a different perspective and interpretation of music.

Recently, Lee helped me prepare for a music competition when I was asked on short notice to join the madrigal choir. I appreciated his help, and all the support and encouragement that I receive from the choir and from our church.

Faith Reflection III: Sage Fields Tyler

My name is Sage Fields Tyler. I'm in the ninth grade at Bishop O'Dowd High School in Oakland. My parents are Cheryl and Tom Fields Tyler.

The story of Pentecost, in Acts 2, is the story about the beginning of the church. Today, I'm going to share my thoughts about why church and belonging to a church are so important to me. I think church and belonging to church are important, because the church and participation in the church gives us guidance, people to trust, a place to serve, and a connection to our God.

An example of guidance from the church is Camp WOW. Over the past two summers, my dad has hosted a summer camp called Camp WOW for our church group as way for us to connect to God through the Earth. This camp has given me guidance. Guidance to preserving the Earth, treasuring its wonders, and connecting to the holy spirit through them.

An example of people I become friends with through church is my friend, Russell. Back in the day when I was in kindergarten, Russell was in my class. I thought he was a little weird and I remember him as a kind of a troublemaker. He and his family moved in the middle of elementary school and I didn't see him for a while. We were not really friends at the time so I didn't think much of it. We got reconnected when his family came to church and we had Sunday school together. Today, he is a great friend and someone who makes church for me an even happier experience.

Also, you have a chance to give back through church. Just last week, my family and friends walked in the FESCO Shelter Shuffle. We enjoyed ourselves in the outdoors. We strengthened our relationship with one another and the world around us, and we gave back. It felt good to help people who needed our helping hand. This strengthening of community, helping people, and enjoying ourselves was possible because of our connection to the church. Participation in church also allows us to reach our God, or our Spirit, and we can use this connection in all these ways.

The story of Pentecost also reminds us of God's vision of unity for the church, and of our equality as members of the church. We are not all the same but, yet, we are all equal in God's family. The story of Pentecost teaches us that we are all in this together, and that we can talk with one another. For example, if you turn to the person next to you, you don't see a reflection of yourself. You see someone who is different from yourself. However, you are both here. You are both together, and equal to each other. You can talk to one another, laugh, shake hands, and share each other's grace. That's what we do in worship, in church school, at coffee hour, and when we work together to help each other and to help our community.

My mom has had a big influence on my involvement in church. She majored in religion in college, and studied theology in graduate school, long before my time. My mom has a connection with the Holy Spirit like the people in the scripture reading.

I believe this is why she is the loving, caring, giving, crying, and heartfelt person that she is today. Her connection to church affects me as well. I would not be the person I am today without

it, or without her influence on my life or her example as a person of faith and as a church member. In this way, church has changed my life.

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Closing: The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

Jaime, Ryan, and Sage have each shared their faith reflections on the meaning of church, and the importance of being part of a church community. On behalf of the them and our entire confirmation class, I ask you to consider for yourself the questions that they have been reflecting on, and how you would answer these same questions if you were standing here in the pulpit today?

The first question is, “Where and in whom have you seen the Holy Spirit at work?” Jaime said that he has felt the Holy Spirit at work in his life through prayer and participation in the life of Eden Church. Ryan explained that he has felt the Holy Spirit at work in the friendships that he has made in church school and confirmation class, and in his participation in music and the arts. And, Sage shared that he has seen the Holy Spirit at work in his mother’s example, and in the things that he and his classmates have done to give back to others in our community. These are some of our confirmands’ answers. What are yours? Where and in whom have you seen the Holy Spirit at work? Secondly, “Who taught you that church matters, and what it means to be part of a faith community?”

The confirmands have shared that their parents or a friend got them to church and their teachers and advisors have taught them what it means to be the church, and that church matters. Who taught you these things?

Finally, “How can you share what you’ve learned with others?”

The 2009–2010 Confirmation Class comes to a close today as our students are confirmed this morning. They, in fact, we are all here today, in part, because the first twelve apostles who gathered in Jerusalem dedicated themselves to sharing what they had discerned from that profound experience at the first Christian Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit touched their lives, and gave them a sense of purpose and direction, so they left that celebration and went to the four corners of the universe to be the church for others—to pray and worship, to teach and learn, to care for themselves and their neighbors, and to fellowship with each other and invite others to be part of their community.

The ways in which each one carried out this Pentecostal ministry varied. But the fact that the apostles embraced their calling is the reason that we are here today and whether and to what degree the torch, and our faith is passed on to others. Amen.