



“Gifts of the Spirit”

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***Pentecost 2007
May 27, 2007
Acts 2:1-21 (NRSV)***

Today we join Christians around the world in celebrating one of the “high holy days” of our faith—the Day of Pentecost—the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the Church.

Like most Christian holidays, our observance of Pentecost is grounded in an ancient Jewish festival. Our celebration today is associated with the Jewish Feast of Pentecost—also known as the Feast of Weeks, because it was observed seven weeks after the Sabbath on which Passover began. For Jews, the purpose of this feast day is commemorating God’s gift of the Law at Sinai.

The reference point for dating Pentecost in the Christian church is Easter, rather than Passover. The Christian Pentecost is celebrated on the fiftieth day after Easter. For us, Pentecost commemorates the gift of the Holy Spirit, which empowered the Apostles (Jesus’ first followers) to go out from Jerusalem to share Christ’s love with the residents of every nation.

II

The story of Pentecost is riddled with theological curiosities about the apostles’ speaking in tongues, and Peter’s quotation of Joel’s prophecy about young and old dreaming dreams and seeing visions, leaving latter generations to wonder what in God’s name went on that day.

Like most biblical scholars, I believe that Acts 2 is less of an “historical description” (a play-by-play) of the events at the first Pentecost in Jerusalem, and more of a “theological description” of the meaning of the occasion.

For me, Pentecost is not some surreal one-time experience. It is a phenomenon that happened and continues to happen in our time. Pentecost is what church is about. Since Confirmation is a spiritual formation program that prepares young people for membership in the church, Pentecost is also what Confirmation is about at Eden Church.

III

Our Confirmation curriculum is based on Acts 2, particularly the last six verses in chapter 2, verses 42-47. Here, Luke, the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, 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.

If you turn to the matrix that follows our Confirmation schedule in today's worship bulletin, you'll see an illustration that summarizes how our Confirmation program was structured this year in order to provide our youth 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 continued this effort as we learned how to be safe, strong, and free through the CAP program. We strengthened our friendship within our class through study, fellowship, service, and worship, and we made new friends with other NCNC UCC youth at Confirmation Camp. Through the support of our congregation and parents, we raised all the money needed to send our youth and advisors to Confirmation Camp.

We walked the labyrinth at one of our first sessions, 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 Lord's Prayer, while others were as contemporary as singing 21st century praise music, and as nontraditional as the art forms that we created ourselves.

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. Our confirmands also provided significant support for the community music celebrations.

Confirmation also included study of the Word (*kerygma*). Together, we learned about the major historical events behind the Biblical narrative, and the several literary forms that are found within the 66 books of the Protestant Bible.

We studied the historic creeds of the Christian faith, and expressed our own beliefs through the arts. We supported the work of the E-Team by distributing welcome gifts, participating in the Inquirer's Class, and leading the most recent class. Based on the confirmands' success in bringing in new members, the E-Team has put them permanently in charge of evangelism.

In addition to being wonderful evangelists—heralds of good news—our confirmands have served as deacons of the church (*diakonia*). They worked well together on numerous projects including a brunch fundraiser, providing hospitality for community music events, visiting homebound members, teaching church school, and learning about community organizing.

While I know that their parents' experiences of them may differ sometimes, my experience of our confirmands is that they are a respectful, helpful, and well-disciplined bunch. I have never felt the need to raise my voice to any of them or to ask them twice to do something that was expected. They are a wonderful group, individually and collectively.

IV

So, having had the CliffsNotes summary of Eden's Confirmation program this year, perhaps you begin to see and agree with me that Pentecost was not just an historic or theologically constructed event. It is an ongoing, unfolding experience of which we are privileged to be a part, an example of which we celebrate with our Confirmation families today, and a series of occasions for which I am very grateful.

I am especially grateful to our parents and advisors for their support. Even though few of our confirmands' parents have had the opportunity to participate in Confirmation themselves, they have been eager to learn what the program is about. They have been very supportive of their children's involvement in our program, and they have shared their gifts of time and hospitality by providing meals for many of our class sessions.

Now a word about our advisors: **Mark Unbehagen**, our wonderful Minister of Music and Outreach, has joined us for a number of sessions. Mark supported our learning by teaching and conducting music, leading some of our break-out sessions, contributing to class discussion, and by being a wonderful, loving presence and terrific role model for our kids.

Suzie and John Hasselkuss and **Clyde Nachand** have been the Confirmation *Uber*-parents. Like Simeon and Anna, who saw the promise in the infant Christ when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple to be blessed, Suzie, John, and Clyde have always looked for and evoked the best in our youth, through their patient support, and loving presence.

Clyde (whom the last Confirmation class nick-named, “Dude”) has the unique distinction of taking two classes to Confirmation Camp with me. Let’s just say, “It’s a ministry. Many are called, but few are chosen.”

Suzie has been “the wind beneath our wings,” supporting parents’ help with meals, making phone call reminders, helping with transportation, and doing whatever it takes to keep everyone in the boat and to keep the boat from tipping over.

John, all the while has been his fun-loving, witty self. Wit, you know, is one of the names for God in the Old Testament. As the oldest participant in Confirmation, and the person who gives and takes the most jokes and jabs, the title, “Wit,” is very fitting.

I know that I speak for all of our advisors when I say that the best part of Confirmation for us has been getting to know better each of our confirmands, and experiencing their spiritual gifts first-hand. There are many things we could say about the gifts of each of our youth, but let me offer a few for starters, in alphabetical order by first name.

Alexandra (Alex) Romero: is a Renaissance person. She is a good reader and an excellent musician. She has performed in many pageants and ensembles at Eden Church. She is also one of two Confirmands in this year’s class who is bilingual. During our course on creeds, Alex wowed everybody with her ability to read the Apostle’s Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the UCC Statement of Faith in both Spanish and English. Alex is also a strong athlete. She plays on a baseball team, boxes competitively, and enjoys motocross. Do not mess with Alex. Instead, ask her to help you, and she’s there. During the Hayward Teacher’s strike, Alex and her younger brother, Jaime, Jr., volunteered at Eden Church to help clean up our Loving Arms Nursery, after the renovation mess, so that the room was ready for its young inhabitants.

Like Alex, **Dusty Rose**, is an accomplished musician. He has a beautiful singing voice, and was chosen for Honor Choir at Castro Valley High. Dusty is intelligent, quick-witted, and compassionate. Of all the confirmands this year, he is among the most knowledgeable of the Bible. Dusty is a caring big brother, and is kind and helpful with other children. One of my favorite remembrances of Dusty this year, however, has to do someone a bit older, Win Lockerby. Part of our Confirmation program involved visiting shut-ins. I was a little short on people for the kids to visit, so I called Win and asked her if she would pretend to be a shut-in for a day, so that Dusty and I could visit. She agreed. Before our visit, Dusty was feeling a little unsure about how to handle the situation, so we practiced over a cheeseburger and fries. In the end, he handled the visit beautifully, and charmed the sox off of Win. On the drive home, I asked Dusty how he felt about the visit. He said, “I was afraid maybe it was going to be boring, but it wasn’t! I really like Win. She’s really cool.” I said, “Yeah, I know.”

Jenna-Marie Moniz, like Dusty, is a caring older sibling for her younger sisters. She is also very bright, and a good student. Jenna has been an honor student at Winton Middle School, and has been accepted at IMPAC High School where she will matriculate this fall. If you know the Moniz family, or if you’ve seen a back issue of *Chimes*, you may know that Jenna is a poet and that she has won some writing awards.

Jenna also enjoys music. At Eden, she has played in the bell choir and the Orf ensemble at Eden, and she has sung in our youth choir. Though there is a lot of competition in the class for “most shy person,” Jenna probably gets that award. She is much more comfortable with a pen and paper in her hand than a microphone in her face. Today she is the ghost writer who prepared Clyde’s offering invitation and prayer of dedication.

If Jenna gets the award for being the most introverted, then **Jeremy D’Anjou**, gets the award for being the most extroverted. Several times when the Confirmation Class led worship this past year, Jeremy bravely volunteered to be our lead-off speaker—just like today—thank goodness. How many of you would have signed up to read the story of Pentecost? In addition to being a poised worship leadership, Jeremy is a great musician—what a delight it has been to experience the growth in his talent as a vocalist and drummer. Jeremy is also a good student of the Bible, and a devoted sacramental minister. Jeremy was often the first to volunteer to serve communion. I recall too that though we only practice “one baptism” in our tradition, Jeremy had an unintended dunking in the Cazedero creek, when he slipped and fell near the water fall. I will not soon forget laying his clothes out to dry on logs, or sleeping next to his sneakers while a borrowed space heater warmed them up next to my bunk.

I suspect that as our confirmands reflect on their experience of the past nine months, most if not all will say that Confirmation Camp has been the best part of the program. I know that **Izzi Newey** is among our greatest camp enthusiasts. In going through photos from the past year, I recently found some wonderful shots of Izzi. I’ve never seen her with such a big smile as she sported at Caz. Izzi is a delightful person. It has been a blessing to watch her gain confidence, take on responsibility, and earn the respect of so many at such a tender age. One of attributes that I most admire about Izzi is that she is very dependable. A sign of her dependability is that she attended every Confirmation class, with me. While I’m sure that we all see the merits of good attendance, I will never forget that Izzi made a point of being at church and performing music with the Confirmation Class and Chancel Choir just a day and one-half after her father died. I wonder how many of us could have pulled ourselves together to show up under similar circumstances. Izzi is not only dependable. She is an excellent student, and a talented visual artist and musician. She is a capable worship leader and has served in virtually every role, except the sermon. (There’s still time.) She is also very responsible, trustworthy, and polite—an example for us all.

Like Izzi, **Scott Christensen** is also a very dependable and helpful person. Scott and Jeremy had nearly perfect attendance at Confirmation and worship. With a few pointers, Scott stepped in with Jeremy and Izzi, and very ably filled almost every worship leader role over the last nine months. Scott was a tremendous asset to our group, especially around our service projects and fundraiser, because he was such a diligent worker. Scott was also a delight to have in class, because he asked such thoughtful questions. Many of them started with phrase such as these: “Now wait a minute? What? Hey, explain that again!” Scott consistently asked the kind of questions about the Bible, theology, and ethics that ensured we went to a higher level of discourse. Scott’s

inquisitive nature was especially impressive given that his family was new to Eden, and that he was one of the younger students in the class.

Shannon Vierra, like Scott Christensen and Alex Romero, is also one of the younger confirmands. Also, like Alex Romero, Shannon is a serious athlete and multi-talented person. Shannon is the only confirmand I've instructed in twenty-five years who has had a black belt in karate. Shannon is also a talented hip hop dancer. Her dance team has competed at the local, state, and regional levels. In addition to having a strong body, Shannon has a strong mind and faith, and she has exhibited an impressive commitment to Eden Church. Shannon has attended worship and church school regularly—most often on her own—since she was old enough to walk to church by herself. Shannon began attending Eden through the CAAMP program back in the day when Jeanne Strauss was directing it, and later became involved in our church school, our children's music programs, and Confirmation. Shannon is a talented singer, actor, and Orf musician. It has been a joy for us that Shannon has chosen Eden Church as her spiritual home, and that she has remained committed to participating in our congregation all these years.

Because Eden is not a large church, we don't offer Confirmation every year, and because we are a growing church, not every youth who comes to our congregation has had an opportunity to be confirmed elsewhere, so the result is that we sometimes have quite an age range represented among our participants, which is the case this year.

Tori Miller, a junior at Castro Valley High School, is the eldest of our confirmands. I have to admit, when sorting out how to constitute this class one year ago, I thought to myself, "How is *this* going to work: five eighth graders, one ninth grader, and one eleventh grader?" The answer to my question was, "Tori Miller." Tori made it work. She is one of the most mature, polite, well-put-together teens you will meet in your life. Being an experienced big sister was excellent preparation for her role as the leader of our youth pack. The younger kids look up to her. They respect and admire her. And they accept her direction. Tori set the bar for politeness, attentiveness, and helpfulness. She was especially effective in leading some Sunday classes, in supporting our service projects, and helping the shyer kids feel more comfortable in the group. In addition to the leadership skills that she exhibited, we are proud of Tori's musical accomplishments at church and at Castro Valley High, and we look forward to hearing her sing and play the piano around Eden in the months and years ahead.

V

So, the point of the sermon, in case you've missed it, is that Pentecost was and is a spiritual experience of the first apostles that believers continue to celebrate. We celebrate this spiritual experience on the anniversary of the church's birth. We celebrate it through the learning and serving of our young people, and we celebrate it through worship and prayer, fellowship and community organizing, study and evangelism, and congregational care and community service. This is what we celebrate on Pentecost. This is what all the fuss is about. This is Pentecost. Amen