

The Trivial and the Faithful
Text: Acts 2:4
Preached by Bruce D. Ervin
Pentecost
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Professor Albert Einstein was travelling on a train. The famous physicist had just gotten on at Princeton Junction, and the conductor was coming through the car, asking for tickets. "Tickets, please; have your tickets ready please." Dr. Einstein reached into the pocket of his suit coat. No ticket. He reached into the other pocket. Still no ticket. He looked in his brief case, his trench coat, his wallet. No luck. The conductor said, "That's okay, Dr. Einstein; we know who you are. We know that you wouldn't have gotten on this train without buying a ticket, so don't worry about it." The conductor continued on down the car, collecting tickets. Just before going into the next car he looked back, and there was the great Albert Einstein on his hands and knees, looking under his seat for that lost ticket. The conductor rushed back to him and said, "It really is okay, Professor. We know who you are. We know that you bought a ticket."

And Dr. Einstein said, "Yes, and I know who I am too. What I don't know is where I'm going!"

Where are *you* going?

Where are you going? Where are you going?

Can you take me with you?

For my hand is cold and needs warmth.

Where are you going?

That poignant song from the musical *Godspell* speaks to me of a lost soul who is reaching out to Jesus for comfort and direction. A lost soul who doesn't know what she's supposed to do with her life, so she's looking to Jesus to show her the way.

What am I supposed to do with my life? What is the meaning and purpose of life? These are among the ultimate questions which biblical faith seeks to answer. Religion which is vital, religion which is faithful, religion which is worth committing your life to asks tough and ultimate questions: What am I supposed to do with my life? Is there life beyond this world? What is Truth? Is there any cause that I would be willing to die for? Is there any cause for which others should die or kill? Vital religion asks tough questions, and it demands deep commitments: dedicating one's self to the struggle for justice, seeking a world of peace, loving your neighbour.

These are the things that biblical faith is all about. But how often do such questions appear on the agendas of our meetings?

Years ago at a meeting of the Toronto Conference Executive Committee, several churches were reporting on the progress that they were making toward amalgamating their congregations into one new congregation. Among other

things, it was reported, they had agreed on what colour the choir robes would be. After the report someone said that he was encouraged by the fact that the really tough questions had been answered like the colour of the choir robes. It gave him hope that now we might be able to find solutions to some of the minor issues, like peace in the Middle East.

Where are we going? Where are *you* going? Peter got *his* answer on Pentecost. Peter found out what he was supposed to do with his life that day. All sorts of folks were gathered in Jerusalem for a Jewish festival. They'd come from the scattered provinces of the Roman Empire. Each was speaking in the language of his or her own region, yet somehow they were able to understand each other.

This occurred 50 days after Jesus' resurrection. After 50 days of encountering the Crucified and Risen Christ, 50 days of pondering the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, 50 days of praying; after all that, Peter was a changed man. He had conviction and courage and clarity which he'd never had before. So when he saw what was going on – all these people filled with passion and speaking with great excitement and somehow everyone understanding everyone else – when he saw this, suddenly he perceived what it was all about. Not only that, but just as suddenly he got the notion that he was supposed to interpret it to everyone else. So he got up and he told the folks that this was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This was the in-breaking of God's kingdom. Just like that: he knew what was going on and he knew what he had to do about it. This uneducated fisherman who had been so lost and confused knew what he had to do: not only at that moment but for the rest of his life.

Have you ever had a moment like that? All of a sudden it was like a light bulb came on and you knew what you were supposed to do. Like that time when I got on a crowded bus in Chicago and the people were all scrunched together at the front, even though there was plenty of room at the back. The people were ignoring the driver's direction to move back, and suddenly it came to me what I needed to do. With my best preacher's voice I said, "If you all would just move back, everything would be fine." And they did!

Sometimes you just know what you have to do. That's the power of the Holy Spirit. That's the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. If you've had a moment like that, then you've experienced the Holy Spirit. The Spirit tells us what we're called to do with our lives: both in the immediate situations in which we find ourselves and over the long haul. We've got the courage to do tough things, we've got the power to do tough things, we've got the wisdom to ask tough questions and offer tough answers. It's a gift of the Holy Spirit; a blessing from the One in whom we can do *all* things (Philippians 4:13).

There's nothing trivial about Pentecost. There's nothing trivial about the Holy Spirit. There is power and profundity when the Spirit is poured out upon the Church.

And you know, it *had* to be the Spirit who was at work that day. I mean, people understanding all those different languages? A roofer was at the house

yesterday and he was talking with my brother-in-law about putting in a bathroom vent and they're talking about connectors and reducers and I don't know what all else and they might as well have been speaking in tongues for all I could tell. I didn't have a *clue* what they were talking about! But *they* understood each other. And by the power of the Spirit, those folks understood each other on Pentecost. That's profound! The faithful work of the Spirit is profound!

Yet so often, we trivialize the life of faith. God is asking you, "What are you doing with your life?", and we're worried about the colour of choir robes. God is asking you, "What are you going to do today for a homeless person? What are you going to do today for a victim of abuse? What are you going to do today to reduce life-threatening carbon levels in the atmosphere?" God is asking us tough questions. And we're worried about slightly exceeding the paper clip budget.

This tendency to trivialize the faith began right there on Pentecost. The Holy Spirit has been poured out upon the people – a life-changing, history-making event has occurred – and someone said, "No big deal; they're just drunk!"

We take the eternal and make it seem trivial. The Church is changing the world through the power of the Spirit – both 2,000 years ago on Pentecost and throughout history and now – the Church is changing the world through the power of the Spirit and so often people act as if it's no big deal. I mean, think about it: in Europe, it was the Church that helped civilization to survive the Dark Ages. Science and philosophy and writing were kept alive in the monasteries. It was the Church that contributed significantly to the rise of democracy. The whole notion of a limited monarchy, responsible government and a strong Parliament came out of the Church of Scotland, when they replaced bishops with presbyteries and the General Assembly. And you can't understand the modern struggle for justice without the Church. Think of Dr. Martin Luther King and the Southern *Christian* Leadership Conference; Pope John Paul II and his opposition to communism in Poland, and the young people who met in a church and then marched by candlelight through the streets of East Berlin during the dying days of communism in Central Europe. The Church has changed and is changing the world. But it seems like people think, "Well, the work of the Church is nice, but when push comes to shove it's not really all that important." You know, a fellow is pulling stuff out of his garage that's in various states of disrepair and he says, "Honey, what should I do with this?" And his wife says, "If it's broke then fix it; but if it works a little bit, give it to the church."

God doesn't want our leftovers! God doesn't want our things that *sort of* work. God wants the first and the best of *all* that we have to offer. I mean, God has given us so much: the gift of the Spirit to the Church, the *gifts* of the Spirit to each of us, and especially the gift of Jesus Christ. God has given us God's first and God's best. The *least* that we can do is offer back our best to the glory of God and for the work of the Church.

And you know, we get it. In some key ways, here at Knox, we get it. Consider the care that goes into the maintenance of this building. No leftovers here. Nothing that only works a little bit here. We love this building. We are committed to maintaining the beauty of this building. And well we should be: this is the house of the Lord! We value excellence in regard to the care of church property. We value excellence in regard to looking after our finances. And in so doing, we are praising God. Psalm 47 says, "Sing praises with your utmost skill." That's what we're doing when we take excellent care of this building. That's what we're doing when we offer our gifts of administrative excellence to the church. That's what we're doing when we take the time as elders to sit and truly listen to the people whom we visit. We're praising God with our utmost skill.

It's a matter of priorities. The OPP is making a big deal out of its stepped-up highway patrols this holiday weekend. One officer was talking about how, "This weekend our priority is enforcement." And that would be different from any other weekend...how? Maybe on other weekends their priority is eating donuts; I don't know...

I would hope that enforcement of the law is *always* the OPP's priority. Well, maybe not the speed limit, but otherwise...

It's a matter of priorities! It's a matter of discerning the difference between trivial things and great things and then committing ourselves and committing the church to doing *great* things. I think we'd all agree that Jesus did great things. But listen again to what Jesus says in John 14:12: "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do *greater* works than these..." The one who believes in Jesus will do even *greater* works than Jesus did! The *Church* is called to do even greater things than Jesus did! There's nothing trivial about that! We are called to heal the sick, visit the lonely, encourage the downcast, provide shelter for the homeless, nurture the souls of those who are babes in the faith, and proclaim the good news of God's love to rich and poor alike. That's what Jesus did and that's what the Church is called to do: on a much grander scale than Jesus was ever able to do because he didn't have the Internet! We're called to do these great things and we're called to put in place the physical and financial and administrative infrastructure to make it happen. A commitment of excellence for Christ's sake. Not just "good enough" but *excellence*. Our first and our best gifts for the work of the Kingdom of God. Time, talent and treasure. That's what it means to believe in Jesus. That's what it means to be a Christian. That's what it means to be a member of the Church.

It comes down to this: Is the Church an optional and peripheral aspect of your life, or does it lie at the heart of who you are? Is it primarily a place for your own comfort and recreation, or is it a way to be in the world for others? Jesus engaged in comfort and recreation, to be sure. He loved a good meal and a funny story. But in the end he was in the world to carry God's love to others. There's nothing recreational about dying on a Cross. The Church is engaged in the world for others. That's hard work, which demands not just good enough; no, it demands excellence. It requires not just something that works a little bit; no, it requires our first and our best.

Whatever it requires, the Spirit will provide it. Jesus said, "I will do whatever you ask in my name" (John 14:13). Sometimes we're hesitant to try great things because we are afraid that the resources will not be there, but Jesus said, "I will do whatever you ask in my name. If you ask for the resources, I will provide them." And to prove the point, Jesus pulled some strings and arranged for the Holy Spirit to descend upon the Church: the Spirit of Wisdom, the Spirit of Power, the Spirit of Possibility. All of that chatter on Pentecost was people "speaking of God's deeds of power" (Acts 2:14). That's the same power that God has offered Knox Church throughout its almost 162 years. The same power that God offers us today. Like the sign outside our front door says, "With God, all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

Sometimes in the Church we major in minors. But there's nothing minor about the gifts which God has promised the Church; the gifts which God has so lavishly bestowed upon the Church ever since her founding at Pentecost nearly 2000 years ago. God has been so very good to us. God has given us God's first and God's best in Jesus. We are called to offer our best back to God. It's a way of saying, "Thank you." And we can trust God to continue to give us the gifts that we need to live faithfully and follow Jesus as we seek the kingdom.

Where are you going with your life? Well, if you'll follow Jesus, you'll find out. And it's going to be good! Amen.