

The Forgotten Holy Day  
John 14:8-27

With Mother's Day recently passed and Father's Day on the horizon, let's pause for a moment to reflect on the true definition of what makes a holiday, or even a holy day.

This time of year we're all running to the store at the last minute to buy a card for that "special someone." Like, if you bought a Mother's Day card, it's not enough to send a card to your mother; you'll need to send one to your daughters who are mothers, or daughters-in-law, and every female relative who's a mother. Same goes for Father's Day.

And then there's Grandparents' Day" and even "Children's Day" (as if a big birthday party once a year weren't enough). You also have to remember Valentine's Day and its odd sister "Sweetest Day" for your significant other. Even the workplace has its own days now with "Administrative Assistants Day" (used to be Secretary's Day) and "Boss's Day" kind of canceling each other out.

Some have disparagingly called the burgeoning number of card-worthy days "Hallmark Holidays" after the greeting card company that seems to invent new ways to obligate us to celebrate relatively ordinary stuff. But does that make these ever-increasing card-buying events "holidays" by definition? The very word "holiday" comes to us from "holy day," which would imply that some kind of religious observance is involved. But other than the "biggies" like Christmas and Easter — the ones that bring out the crowds — most religious holidays don't get a slot in the rack at the card store.

If you were a Buddhist, for example, your big day would be Buddha's birthday, but there are no Buddha birthday cards at the store. Mormons celebrate "Pioneer Day" on July 24 — the date in 1847 when Brigham Young and his followers pushed their handcarts over the mountains to the Salt Lake Valley in Utah. There Young proclaimed, "This is the place." The whole state shuts down that day with parades and celebrations. For the Latter Day Saints, it's a bigger occasion for parades, fireworks, and jell-o based casseroles than Christmas and the Fourth of July combined. And yet, no card.

Up the hill in Park City, Utah, celebrities engage in the annual January festival of camera lights called Sundance, while in Native-American culture, the Sun Dance is the time of thanksgiving for the harvest. Lots of dancing in both places — but no cards.

Hindus do Diwali, Sikhs get down on Guru Nanak's Day, and pagans celebrate Samhain on October 31. Interesting stuff, but still not card-worthy.

The Judeo-Christian tradition has similar holy days that aren't considered to be Hallmark holidays. While Hanukkah and Yom Kippur are great Jewish holidays, Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks, doesn't make the card cut. And while Christmas is the ultimate card-sending event and Easter a feast of chocolate bunnies, Christians and card writers tend to look past Pentecost.

Now, you'd think a greeting card giant like Hallmark would be all over this holiday. After all, what's not to like? You got your fire, your wind, your speaking in other languages, your birth of one of the great religious movements in history, your built-in holiday Spirit — all the stuff that makes for a memorable event. It even lends itself to great slogans like “Hope you get fired up this Pentecost” or “More (Holy Spirit) power to ya!”

But the shelves of your local greeting card merchant are empty of Pentecost cards, kinda like our churches are empty on the holiday itself. Maybe not more empty than usual, but you do not have to set up extra chairs like Christmas and Easter.

Granted, in some parts of the world Pentecost weekend is still deeper in the consciousness of people. In mainland Europe, for example, the Monday after Pentecost is still considered to be a bank holiday or, to put it in American terms, a “three-day weekend.” It's one of the last holdovers of Christian culture in Europe, but it likely has more to do with the day off than with any consideration for the Holy Spirit.

So, has Pentecost simply been passed over in favor of more time off in the spring or is there something more at work here? Should we be making a bigger deal out of this day when the Christian movement was stoked by Spirit fire? Should we be trying to promote another holiday for our people to come back and fill the pews?

Maybe. It is, after all, pretty awesome to think about what happened that day and to come into a sanctuary splashed in blazing red. But then again, maybe the whole idea of Pentecost is less about celebrating the past event and, instead, embracing the present reality.

The Gospel text for Pentecost from John 14 gives us a clue that the work of the Holy Spirit was not a one-shot deal. Jesus was preparing to return to the Father and was preparing the disciples for his departure. Still confused about all that Jesus was saying, Philip spoke for the rest: “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Give us a sign, make it plain.

Jesus' response, however, was to remind Philip and the others that he had been doing that all along — all they needed to do was “believe.” That word is used three times in verses 10-11 as a way of linking Jesus' work on behalf of the Father with their work as disciples. As God the Father dwelt in Jesus, so would the Spirit of Jesus dwell in them; so much so that the disciples would “do greater works than these.” Their belief was to translate into action, and their love for Jesus would find its foundation in obedience to his “commandments” or instruction.

Jesus' words were designed to comfort the disciples, who had no doubt relied on him for everything. They had been followers, hangers-on, students who rarely got the lesson. Jesus was leaving, but not leaving them hanging with only a memory of him to guide them. His departure was opening the way for another, the paraclete, to come as the one who would instruct, motivate, encourage, counsel, intercede, and be with them forever. Jesus had already been a paraclete for them through his word and example, but now his work would continue in them through the Holy Spirit.

While that would seem to be something to celebrate, Jesus was quick to remind his disciples that their association with him wouldn't make them universally popular and revered. The Paraclete was the "Spirit of truth" — the spiritual equivalent of Jesus who called himself "the way, the truth, and the life." As the world did not receive Jesus, hanging him on a cross, and the world also "cannot receive" the Spirit of truth "because it neither sees him nor knows him." In taking the Spirit of Christ into their own lives, the disciples would be making themselves subject to the same trials that Jesus faced as God's representative.

The coming of the Holy Spirit should remind us that claiming to be followers of the historical Jesus is one thing, but allowing the Spirit of the risen Christ to fully dwell in us is another. The former can be confined to simply knowing a lot about Jesus — marking the Christian holidays — while the latter actually involves representing Jesus and acting every day on his behalf according to his model of life and faith.

If we do that, we're likely to run into opposition from those who are comfortable with the world and from those who are comfortable with the church's status quo. Jesus bugged people with the truth, and if we're truly following him we'll be doing the same. An invitation to a life of suffering and struggle isn't exactly the kind of card you want to open and put on the mantel.

Pentecost was the catalyst for the explosive growth of the church as the Spirit moved among them. But that same Spirit would move many of those same people into dangerous and deadly situations where they were forced to rely fully on the Spirit indwelling Christ — the only "Advocate" they would have in front of mobs and murderous monarchs. While we may not be called to give up our lives in the same way as they did, if we take the Spirit seriously as the guide for our lives we may find ourselves living quite uncomfortably. Jesus promised the Spirit, but he didn't promise that life would be easy.

As one seminary professor told an incoming first-year class, "Folks, when God calls you, he's not doing you a favor." There is truth to that!

But with the challenge of the indwelling Holy Spirit also comes a promise. The Holy Spirit would "remind" the disciples of what he had taught them. They would also be left with the "peace" of Jesus — not peace in terms of the absence of conflict or the false sense of security that the "world gives," but peace born out of the life and love of Jesus himself. The vision of God's peace and justice that had long been Israel's hope and was being realized in Jesus and, in turn, through his disciples who would carry on the mission until his return. Having received that peace, the disciples were to not be afraid in the face of opposition. Through their work as representatives of Jesus, God would set the world to right.

Given the work laid before those first disciples and their mission, which we continue as their spiritual descendants, we might look at Pentecost as being a true "holy day" but not necessarily a holiday where we can kick back and reminisce about what once was. The coming of the Spirit is a present, active reality — one that motivates us to work, to act, to represent Jesus to the world. You just can't confine that to one day a year. Sure, we need to gather on Pentecost Sunday and be

reminded. But, then again, every day should be a new Pentecost: a fresh wind of the Spirit and a firing up of our desire to serve God with our whole hearts.

And we don't need a card for that! Amen