

Pentecost – Ben Wayman

Acts 2:1-21; I Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23

Today is Pentecost. Pentecost Sunday is the Chicago Cubs of the church year. Pentecost stands for everything that is important about the Christian faith, but it still manages to be forgotten and unappreciated by most Christians. I think this has a lot to do with how Christians have, throughout church history, tried their best to avoid discussing the Holy Spirit. Who is the Holy Spirit? And what does the Holy Spirit have to do with following Jesus? Our confusion about these questions have caused us to treat Pentecost like any other day of the year; a below .500 Sunday... at best.

How many of you have been looking forward to Pentecost since May 24th of last year? How many of you have been singing Pentecost songs for the past month? Woke up this morning to a tree surrounded by presents? Went on an egg hunt? Dressed up in costume? No one? Pentecost gets ripped off. Our failure to appreciate Pentecost is directly related to our failure to appreciate the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's work in the world. Pentecost is the day the Holy Spirit gave birth to the Church. Today is the church's birthday.

And that today is the church's birthday may be at the heart of our problem with Pentecost. It's no secret that many Christians have a love/hate relationship with the church. The truth is, Christians can be downright mean. We can say and do things that damage people in the deepest ways; and do it all in the name of Jesus. I wonder how many of you shuddered when I read the last verse of our Gospel lesson: ...if you retain the sins of any, they are retained? Yeeh. We tend to forget the bit about forgiveness and remember only the bit about retaining sins. Surely this verse sums up what's wrong with the church: even though the church is to be God's agent of forgiveness in the world, Christians can be so unforgiving. It's no wonder many of us hold deep suspicions about the church. And it's no wonder Pentecost gets little fanfare.

But today I'd like to suggest that Pentecost is every bit as important and exciting as Christmas and Easter. Pentecost is the day we are reminded that the church is both human and divine. Our lessons today will help us see that this is true. But in order for us to see this, I think it will be helpful to recap where we've been over the past several months.

In Advent we eagerly looked forward to the birth of God's Son, Jesus, who had been promised to Israel long before. Jesus' birth marks the moment when God did the unthinkable and became one of us. In Jesus' life, we saw God and what it looks like to be God's friend. In Jesus' crucifixion, we saw the depth of God's desire for us and in the resurrection we saw God's power to set us free from sin, death and the devil. Last week, on Ascension Sunday, Kaity helped us see that Jesus' goodbye was only the beginning of God's plan for us.

When we see Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension as the whole story, we're only reading the middle of God's story; we're only paying attention to the middle part of the Apostle's Creed. But there's more to the story. Open with me your pew hymnals to the opening fly leaf. *Would you read this aloud with me, beginning with: "I believe in the Holy Spirit."*

[explain]

As soon as we get to the bit on the Holy Spirit, we are reading in the present tense. We are living in the age of the Spirit and we call this new age the time of the church.

In our Acts reading, Peter describes this time of the church as the "last days." Jesus wasn't the end of the story after all, and his Ascension does not mean that God has officially left the building. Our readings today make clear that the present age is not a lame duck period where we are waiting on God to get his act together and pull off the fireworks of the full restoration of creation. In fact, the period of the church is the fireworks. And God is really excited about it.

But in order for us to be excited about it, I think we need to see how the Holy Spirit's creation of the church is directly tied to Jesus. John's Gospel is really helpful here. While our lesson from Acts gives us the typical story of Pentecost, John shows us how Pentecost is linked to Jesus.

For John, the giving of the Spirit to the church explains how we are able to follow Jesus. The Spirit gives the church new life – specifically, the Spirit gives us lives capable of following Jesus and becoming friends with God.

What's interesting about John's story of the giving of the Spirit is that it does not occur fifty days after Easter, but on Easter evening. For John, the gift of the Spirit happens immediately after Jesus' resurrection and the Spirit proceeds straight from Jesus' own mouth to the gathered community. The Spirit's creation of a new community, the church, is God's master plan!

Can you imagine it? Us St Paulers gathered here, the church throughout time, and communities of Christians all around the globe – we are central to God's redemption of the world. The Holy Spirit is the engine of our community. And the Holy Spirit makes us divine despite all of our humanness. The church is God's divine agent of redemption.

If this depresses you, it's understandable. The church's history is certainly spotty. From our readings today alone, we can find three reasons why we would be justified in being less than enthusiastic about the church.

First, in John's Gospel, we see a group of Jesus' followers cowering behind a locked door in fear of the Jews, despite the fact that Mary has just told them she has seen the Lord. In fact, it's likely the disciples are afraid of more than the Jews. Nearly all of them abandoned Jesus in his darkest hour. I think this is why Jesus crashed this fear-party with the words "Peace be with you." In other words, "I'm not here to strike you down with lightning for abandoning me."

Unfortunately, Christians too often live in fear. As Christians who live in America, we “spend as much on defense (\$399 billion) as the next twenty top-spending nations combined” (Jehu Hanciles, 2008). We lock down our border, we lock up our doors, and we lock out our computers and cell phones. We install alarm systems in our churches, our homes, and our cars. We are scared of intruders and we are scared of strangers. The truth is, we have given fear a decisive foothold in our lives and this is actually a theological problem. It’s more likely true that just like the disciples in the locked room, we’re more afraid of God’s intrusion into our lives than anything else. But at the least, our fear is a damaging witness to the Peace of the Lord.

A second and third example of the all too humanness of the church can be found in our reading from I Corinthians today. Because our reading begins in the third verse as it does, we need to be reminded that Paul is here addressing a question posed by the Christians in Corinth. Apparently, their worship has become disordered and has brought about some sharp disagreement in the community.

In our reading today, Paul corrects two critical mistakes of the Corinthian Christians. First, he reminds them that every gift they have or service they offer or activity in which they engage is all a gift from the Spirit. They are not the results of individual accomplishment, but *God’s generosity*. In light of this, Paul explains, there is no reason to be proud.

The second problem with the Christians in Corinth is that they have apparently established a hierarchy of gifts. Paul obliterates this hierarchy again, by emphasizing that the Spirit is the source of the gifts, and by emphasizing that these gifts are for the *common good*.

This human tendency to prioritize gifts and services and activities has been with the church its entire history. And right from the start, we have Paul destroying our assumptions that 1) we should get credit for our gifts, services, and activities, and 2) that we can do whatever we want with our gifts, services, and activities. Paul is clear: everything good that we have has been given us by God, and we are to use it for the common good of the church. Your gifts are not your own, Paul tells us, they are for God’s church.

This is where Paul really digs into his theology of the church. We are one body. God has given us everything we need to follow Jesus and to be God’s friends. While God has given gifts of wisdom, healing, prophecy, and interpretation to various ones among us, the gifts are not our own, but for the benefit of our whole community.

And what *this* means is that we need gifts we personally do not possess. We need each other in order to follow Jesus. We not only need each other because we need to benefit from the wide variety of gifts the Spirit offers, but we also need each other to see the gifts that God has given us specifically. In other words, we need help identifying and naming the Spirit’s specific generosity in each other’s lives.

When we live as one body, we begin to look like the new, divine community of the Spirit. In our Acts reading, we see the fireworks of how the Holy Spirit came like a tornado on Jesus' followers. We see them embracing the event as an act of God as they courageously expand their circle and unselfishly share the Gospel to strangers who speak other languages. There is no insularity or fear here: God's powerful action in Christ is for the *world*.

And in being for the world, God's salvation disrupts the world like a massive earthquake. This shows us the prophetic nature of the church. The church is not just another good-willed organization committed to social service and community welfare. The church is a divine community, commissioned by God to give witness to God's saving action in Christ. Indeed, the church is a powerful act of service in the world, but when it allows itself to be only a social service, it forfeits its divine calling to speak and live prophetically the truth of God's salvation.

I think this is an important reminder for us here at St Paul's, particularly because we have an acute sense of how we as Christians are called to serve the world. The question pivots on the nature of that service. The church is not merely a place we go on Sunday mornings, but a community of people with whom we follow Jesus. The church is a Spirit-filled community of human beings who have committed their whole lives to the journey that ultimately ends in God. Accordingly, all of the services in which we engage as a church should be directed toward inviting people to join us in this journey of friendship with God.

Howard Snyder, one of our clearest thinking theologians in the Free Methodist Church, insists that, "The most dynamic and prophetic thing the church can do is first of all to be a worshiping and serving community." The centrality of Christian worship makes us an odd social service institution indeed. And that's because what we really are is a community who offers the world a striking vision of what friendship with God can look like. This (worship) is the most important service we offer the world.

Here we confess our sins. We read an ancient book that we believe is God's word to us today. We hear God's story from a variety of voices: from both men and women; and our daughters indeed prophesy. We rehearse an ancient creed that reminds us of what is true about the world. We pray together. We forgive each other. We eat together and we receive God. In essence, we do life together. We belong to the community that through time and space has proclaimed that Jesus is Lord.

To think that Pentecost is about speaking in tongues is to miss the point. Pentecost is about God. Specifically, it's about how God the Holy Spirit ignites the church in mission to and for the world. Pentecost Sunday reminds us that the church, human though it is, is also divine. And it is in direct continuity with Jesus' story.

All of those resurrection appearances where Jesus is portrayed as being eager to get out of Dodge point to the fact that Jesus thinks that what the Spirit is going to do with the Church is a big deal. In the past, I would read those stories and think: What's the big rush? What could

possibly be better than having Jesus – the resurrected and victorious Jesus – with us? And *God's* answer is: the Spirit; the Spirit and the Spirit's creation of a new kind of community. In fact, this is how Jesus remains with us; through the Spirit.

If we don't see the coming of the Spirit as God does, as a moment of critical importance to our following of Jesus, then we need to rethink our theology of the Spirit and the church. True as it is that the church is human and flawed, it is equally true that the church is divine and infused by the Spirit. In the great diversity of people and gifts and services and activities the Spirit gives the church, we become a new creation that gives witness to God's showing up in Jesus.

Pentecost Sunday is our birthday – together. When we were baptized we became a member of this one body, enlivened by the Spirit to follow Jesus. The Spirit's work in the church is to transform our humanity. And this serves as a sign of God's coming transformation of all creation. God's plan is not only to restore the world, but to elevate it beyond its original creation. The church describes the people God is making into this new creation. And the true mystery of this human and divine community to which we belong, is that somehow, God is forming us into a people who can be his friends and live with him forever.