

Acts 2:1-21

Psalms 104:25-35, 37b

Romans 8:14-17

John 14:8-17, 25-27

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Pentecost Sunday Year C RCL

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Emmanuel Church, Newport, RI

Christmas, Easter and...Can you name the great third feast day in the church? Pentecost. Today!!! Christmas, Easter, Pentecost.

Christmas answers the question (among others) “Does God care?” “Does God care enough about the mess we make of our own lives and the life of the world to do anything about it?” Easter answers the question, among others, “What does God do because God cares?” And Pentecost, the third part of this Trinity, answers the question, “What does it matter?” Do Christmas and Easter matter? ¹ Yes, if it seems we are making a particular fuss about things today, it’s because Pentecost is the third great feast day of the church. So, I want to speak this day about the Feast of the Pentecost and what difference Pentecost makes, why Pentecost matters in our lives as Christians and most importantly, what is the church, and what is the future of the church?. (First, some historical background on this feast day).

Pentecost was first a Jewish feast, second in importance to Passover. It focused on thanksgiving for the harvest and concluded the fifty days of Passover. Later Jews also celebrated the giving of the law to Moses at Sinai on Pentecost. As the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles on that Pentecost day in Jerusalem (as we just heard described in our first reading) the people proclaimed God’s word in many different languages, and the church as a Christian community, was born. Pentecost recalls the descent of the Spirit upon the apostles and marks the beginning of their active work in the world. The symbols of the presence of the Spirit are wind, fire and dove.

The Feast of Pentecost celebrates the presence of the Spirit in our lives. The Spirit came to the frightened apostles as they gathered behind locked doors after the resurrection. When they received the Spirit, they boldly and joyfully went forth to preach the Good News of Jesus, and

¹ The Rev. John G. Hartnett, *The Anglican Digest*, Pentecost A.D. 2009, 46.

the church was “born” (hence, why we often call Pentecost, not entirely accurately, the “birthday of the church”).

So, we are celebrating the coming of the Holy Spirit not only to the first followers of Jesus, but also to we twenty first century followers as well. If Pentecost has become the “:birthday of the church,” it’s vital to ask the question, “What is the church? And perhaps an even harder question to answer, and one that stings for me, “What is the future of the church?

When everything came together for the apostles, people flocked to them, beginning with the changed life and witness of Peter. People flocked to Peter and other disciples, (not just the original 11, plus Matthias) not because of their brilliant teaching, beautiful buildings, majestic tradition or powerful liturgies. People came because they discerned in the apostles a quality of life distinct from anything else they had ever know The life of God seems to be irresistibly attractive.² And, here’s another tough question, are God and the gathered people in community as irresistibly attractive today as they were in ancient Israel? If they are not, that should give us great pause for reflection, and for me, one whose life profession is inextricably tied to the future of the organized church, pause for sadness – but not despair!

Last year at this time I was in Santa Fe, Panama, a beautiful, sleepy mountain town in central Panama. I was in Panama visiting my daughter who was then stationed in the Peace Corps in Panama. On the Sunday of Pentecost my son and I visited a Roman Catholic church in the village. I had scoped out the simple adobe style building the night before. I could not believe that this rather outdoor building had no books, service sheets, hymnals, and the “accoutrements” of worship in evidence that Saturday evening. Were they simply going to bring them all out Sunday morning? The answer was given when Theo and I looked in during the Sunday morning service – The people were not using hymnals, prayer books or service sheets. The place was packed, with many of the teenage girls sitting on the stoop outside the church sort of listening to the preacher and looking around for more activity (i.e. boys!) at the market across the

² Ibid.,-48.

street. I reflected on how I would love to see the church jam packed like that in New England every Sunday, to which Theo, age 28 replied, “Mom, there is nothing else to do here on Sunday mornings. This is the only game in town.” BINGO!!!!!!!

The church in which I grew up, the church in which many of us grew up, was the only “game in town” on Sunday morning—the Sabbath. Nothing else except hospitals and gasoline stations were open on Sundays in my childhood. There was a Sabbath, and there were limited choices of activity. In my opinion, that was a good thing – in fact, a lot like school! Church is what I did on Sunday morning. And, when I am able to give one activity, one event, in the words of my mother, my “undivided attention,” I increased my focus, awareness and acknowledge the all importance of that one thing– being with others in community to give thanks for all we have been given – Now, that’s church! The fact that the buildings in which I worshipped were beautiful, the services were well prepared, the sermons were thoughtful, even provocative, the music was gorgeous, were all the icing on the cake. The bottom line is this: church is the people, not the building, not the service sheets. So, perhaps we should take lessons not only from the church of the 1950’s and 1960’s but also from many full churches in Third World countries today, including the one I visited in Santé Fe, Panama: Don’t get so caught up in worrying about buildings, budgets and having everything so perfect: be with one another.

In the midst of all of our challenges to decrease our budget deficit, and seemingly overwhelming roof repair costs, it is vital to remind ourselves of all that we have – our abundance – which, most importantly, is never found in buildings and programs. Our abundance begins with people – where the church began, the rich diversity of the human race, gathered and worshipping together in all our vulnerability, for solace, strength and renewal. As the priest proclaims in Eucharistic Prayer C, “Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal.

Let the grace of this Communion makes us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name.”³

When we are truly present to one another, as that descending Holy Spirit was to the first frightened followers of Jesus, amazing things happen! “The people of Pentecost (then and now) are the first harvest of the new life, they are living a life of obedience that comes not from dutiful compliance to an external code of do’s and don’ts but embrace an obedience that radiates out from grateful hearts,”⁴ writes John Hartnett. Abundance! The message of Pentecost continues: “Nations need not be at enmity because they are different; our hearts need not be broken because they were hardened first.”⁵

“Christmas and Easter are wonderful celebrations, but they are preliminary. God first came to us in the person of Jesus, and then went to the cross for us, died and was raised, not to show off, but to give us what we needed to be transformed. Until that transformation happens, the story is unfinished and the true meaning of those holidays unfulfilled. It may be that the transformation is not fully accomplished until we are born from this life into the life to come. But at Pentecost we claim what we can of that transformation here and now, for ourselves and for our world.”⁶ And right now we are the church and we are the future of the church. As Woody Allen reminded us years ago, “90% of life is just showing up.”

Thank you for showing up this and every Sunday. Thank you for being church, and being the future of the church, and raising up young Christians among you to insure and bright and vibrant and people filled church, to assure us that the church, it’s “ecclesia,” the gathering of God's people with the Spirit working in and through us. May the grace of this gathering this day “make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name.”⁷ A joyous and abundant Pentecost to you. AMEN

³ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 372.

⁴Hartnett, 47.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 372.