

Sermon: Happy Birthday to the Church!

by Gail Claus, Lay Associate Pastor

Let us pray.

Lord, may the words from my mouth and the meditations on all our hearts be pleasing in your sight. Amen.

I was dismayed to read in the paper that the only Episcopal Church in Rohnert Park has closed its doors after 36 years. Holy Family Episcopal Church has been an integral part of the community: co-founding NOAH, the city's food bank, in which we also participate, sponsoring a community garden that helps a homeless shelter and more. Its presence will be sorely missed.

The congregation wanted to stay together. But giving kept dwindling, attrition was not replaced with new members, and the weekly attendance kept falling.

We need to bring in new members. Because of the demographics of this area we are not likely to attract young families, but we certainly have an opportunity to attract the 50-plus and empty nesters. Let us join together to ensure our church remains vital, but in a growing manner of bringing new members to Christ. Talk about our church! We have mission work, a strong community presence, many spirituality groups, adult education, Bible studies...Tell your friends how fulfilling it is to be part of a loving, active church community and how you participate in the life of the church.

But let's get back to the importance of the day. Today is Pentecost. It is one of the three most important days in the church year – the others are Easter and Christmas. Yet Pentecost may be unfamiliar to us, nearly ignored. Hallmark cards have not yet caught on to Pentecost, nor has the music industry. Imagine (sing) “in your Pentecost bonnet, with

tongues of fire upon it..." Sorry, I couldn't resist in spite of my singing voice, and must credit one of my favorite authors, Marcus Borg, for that one.

It is important to know that Pentecost was originally a Jewish festival before it became a Christian festival. Marcus Borg, in his book *Speaking Christian*, provides a succinct explanation that Pentecost was one of three great Jewish pilgrimages, celebrated fifty days after Passover – that is where Pentecost gets its name as 'pente' means fifty. Within the Jewish tradition, it celebrated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, and the formation of the Jewish community around its covenant with God.

As Christians, we often refer to Pentecost as the birthday of the church. In fact, I hope everyone will stay for coffee hour to enjoy the cake that Grace brought to represent the fiery beginning of the Church. Happy Birthday Church!

But Pentecost is about much more than the birthday of the Church. Pentecost is the time when the Spirit of Jesus fell upon the disciples and other followers. You can think of it as the return and continuous presence of Jesus. Pentecost occurs fifty days after Easter, and ten days after Ascension Thursday. There are two important things we need to remember. The Spirit promised by Jesus is now present among his followers and in the world; and it brought together the Trinity – The Spirit is the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Christ.

Luke is the only person in the Bible who writes about Pentecost. We heard Becky read the story from Acts a few minutes ago. Luke had an overriding interest in showing the spirit at work in and through the early church.

Let us remember the Ascension story we heard last week...The ascending Christ said to his followers: You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. And you will be my witnesses, in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the world... Having spoken these words, Jesus was lifted up, and taken out of their sight.

Imagine how the disciples felt as the Spirit overtook them. They are in the Upper Room, wondering just what all of that meant to them. Likely they were frightened. But then Luke tells us that the Spirit's coming to the disciples was a miracle that was accompanied by something "like the rush of a mighty wind" and the appearance of "tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each of them." They were filled with the Holy Spirit. Take a moment and look at the symbolism Darlene created in the banners and altar. Red, orange and yellow – the colors of fire. And the Doves on the altar – a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

They had been waiting since Ascension for something big to happen. And it had. There was a sudden, new vitality among them. This was a religious experience so strong, so complete and so vibrant that it changed the course of human history.

As they shouted and praised God, there was another surprise. They couldn't understand each other! Instead of their native Aramaic, they heard each other speaking in many languages that were unknown to them prior to this event. This was going to enable the spread of Christianity throughout Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria.

Likely the disciples ran out into the streets telling the story of faith. Jews from all over the world were gathered for the festival of Pentecost. They listened in wonder as the enthusiastic people spoke in the languages of foreigners. Many of the people who had come to the festival were astonished that they could not understand the Galileans. They even accused them of being drunk, hearing only babbling. Peter

stepped forward to address to the crowd, in a common language that everyone understood, likely in Aramaic, explaining what had just occurred.

Peter's explanation to the crowd was straightforward. While the event was so unusual and possibly even frightening, for him, it was the risen Jesus who sent the spirit. He expected the same spirit to descend on all persons who repented and presented themselves for baptism in Jesus' name.

Pentecost launched a missionary movement of the Church.

Are you struck by a parallel to the Tower of Babel story? In it, people tried to build a tower and do without God. God scattered the people and they could not communicate. Now at Pentecost, people tried to listen to God and empty themselves in obedience. The Spirit enabled them to speak in every language of the world. Now in Christ, people understood one another. Pentecost was God's answer to Babel. Pentecost healed Babel.

Jesus promises everyone will get the spirit. A power to all people to preach the truth of the gospel – everybody can be a spokesperson for God, everyone can be a prophet. Church is an occasion of the promise of the Holy Spirit. Ordinary people like you and me can stand up and speak for Jesus. We are empowered to be in the world the same way Jesus was in the world. Think back to the tragedy of the Holy Family Episcopal Church and the suggestions of how to keep our church vital.

Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit's coming to the disciples was a miracle that was accompanied by something "like the rush of a mighty wind" and the appearance of "tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each of them."

Let us remember that Pentecost is much more than the beginning of the Church. It is when the Spirit promised by Jesus is now present among his followers and in the world. The Spirit came upon his followers “like the rush of a mighty wind” and the appearance of “tongues as of fire.” The Spirit is the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Christ.

We all are passionate about two of the most important Christian celebrations – Easter and Christmas. Today I hope you leave with an understanding of the third. Through Pentecost, Jesus has charged us all with responsibility of the vitality and growth of our church.  
Amen.