

“The Church Speaks”

Acts 2:1-21

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May 23, 2021

Earlier this week I was talking with an Edgewood member about the stories of our shared faith, how the stories we tell again and again are not the ones that are the most factual or proven, but are the ones we keep finding meaning in and can connect with our lives today. We tell stories from our history at Edgewood that keep shaping who we understand who we are today, and we tell stories from the Bible that inspire us, challenge us, and reveal to us something about our Creator and creation.

Pentecost is one of those Biblical stories we return to again and again, every single year, as steady and meaningful in the life of the church as Christ’s birth, baptism, death, and resurrection. There are two very important things to remember that happened in the story of Pentecost.

The first is that it was the day the disciples felt the presence of the Holy Spirit, the force that moved between them and united them. It swept in, caught them on fire, and invigorated them for the future. It was untamed and wild and a little bit confusing for them to get a grasp of what the Holy Spirit was, but they felt it and named it and they would forever be changed.

In fact, they were so inspired by the Holy Spirit that in turn, a second thing happened on Pentecost: they created the first Christian Church. In some churches, on Pentecost Sunday they have a party to celebrate the birthday of the church. There are even congregations that sing Happy Birthday, dear Church, and share cake after worship. I'm all for the cake, but I think it is important to remember that two things happened on Pentecost, and the church is only the second

of the two. I think that the birth of the church is wonderful to celebrate, but there is danger in putting the church before the celebration of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost calls us to remember that the Holy Spirit came first, and the church followed.

Before the birth of the church, the disciples are very much focused on trying to discern what God was telling them to do. They focused on living up to Jesus' mission for them. There wasn't a whole lot of organization. They occasionally got together to talk and compare notes, but mostly they were out on the road, in homes with people, doing ministry and following their hearts. They were living out their faith with their minds, bodies, and hearts. In many ways, without having it named, they were living a Spirit-filled life.

Pentecost was a turning point. Instead of a bunch of rogue believers, loosely tied to one another with their love for Jesus and God, they became one united Church. On Pentecost they found that they could understand each other even as they spoke in different languages. There was nothing keeping them apart so the mission of the individual became the mission of the whole. They formed one ministry. And this is Good News. This is very good news--it's the first chapter in the story of how our church got here all these centuries later. But, without remembering that it is the Holy Spirit that first wove them together, we lose something.

Even though the Holy Spirit led to the creation of the church, the Holy Spirit is still separate—it is greater than the church—it is a part of God. I wonder if some of the raw energy and passion that was the focus before Pentecost, energy and passion that came from God, got redirected when the focus instead became about the Church. Remember, the Holy Spirit is described as tongues of fire— uncontrollable and fierce. That is not usually the first description that comes to mind when we think about the day to day life of the church as much as we all love it...

There is a bit of tension between the passion of the Holy Spirit and the institution of the Church. There is temptation to set aside that wild force of God in favor of something more controllable and easily managed. Something you can write a manual about or create an agenda for. Something that can be organized and evaluated and archived. I imagine that on the day after Pentecost, all those who were gathered together were exhausted! Bewildered! Overwhelmed and unsure what was coming next! I imagine that was the day the first church committee was formed. From that day forward people in churches all over the globe have been navigating the tension between the Holy Spirit and the church.

Tension is a good thing when you are not afraid of it - when you honor it's role in our lives. Tension is what fuels creativity and new ideas. Tension draws us into conversations that help us work out things when there are disagreements or uncertainty. When I was a kid and went camping with my dad, he taught me that if you rub two sticks together it creates tension, and that tension creates a spark. The spark can become a fire that cooks your food, keeps you warm at night, and provides a place to gather and tell stories and make music.

In this way, Pentecost a celebration of tension, a time when we can see the value in the clarity and excitement of following the Holy Spirit and the value and importance of having a church that holds a common mission, that gives us a place to organize and mobilize, that draws us together as one people. The church is called to discern in every season how to infuse the work of the church with the fire of the Holy Spirit, how to use the tension to help us live out our mission and serve God in our community.

This year Pentecost is about more than just a Sunday - this is truly a Pentecost season. The last few weeks have felt similar to spring 2020 when we were consumed with a changing landscape related to COVID-19. Instead of everyone sewing masks and learning how to stay at

home, this summer we are discerning how to reemerge in the world, when to wear masks and why, where to go and how to gather and what our next new normal is going to be.

What will this next season look like as we navigate a world that is not the same as it was two years ago but is still being defined and molded? This is a Pentecost moment that calls for us to lean into the best of our church - being a place that welcomes all and works to ensure the safety and accessibility for all God's people, and helps us cultivate with a firey passion a ministry that reaches beyond the walls of the church. The Holy Spirit calls us to find each other in new ways, to reclaim the spark that happens when relationships are formed and nurtured, to tend to those in our midst who are feeling the deep impacts of the past year and a half.

This Pentecost season is a time of meaning making. Each one of us, no matter what our experiences has been, it looking to the next several months to see how we will make sense of what we have been through, what we have learned, what we have lost or gained. We are making meaning of this collective experience. It is a moment when the church is called to help in that meaning making, to be a place where we can grapple together, process, and proclaim who we are and who God is calling us to be. How might the church help people make meaning in their lives in this next season? Will we be a place where people come - online, or outdoors, or in our neighborhoods - to be inspired, to be challenged, to reveal something new about how God is present in our world at this time?

When I think about what it means to be the church in this time of transition, I remember the first Pentecost. People gathered with their different backgrounds, their different languages and by the gift of the Holy Spirit they were able to understand one another. As we slowly start to come back together this summer - as we gather with family we haven't seen in a year, as we reconnect with friends, as we gather as a church - each of us has had a very different year. Some

of us lived alone and acutely felt the sting of isolation. Some of us juggled full-time homeschooling children with full-time jobs and felt like only half of a success at either one. Some of us have lost family members, because of COVID and other reasons, and are deep in grief. Some of us are doing alright - we've gotten real about what is most important in our lives and are committed to carrying that clarity with us into the next season.

My Pentecost prayer is that even in our different experiences, we will understand each other and hold space for those differences, that the church will be a container for a new common language that emerges, that honors the differences and finds unity in our continued commitment to God's love and justice. Some of us are entering into Pentecost as overwhelmed and bewildered as the first followers. I pray the Holy Spirit moves the church to be a place of healing and compassion, even if it doesn't look quite like it did two years ago or doesn't quite fall under the agenda of committee or task force. I pray the fires of Pentecost inspire and challenge us for all that lies ahead. May it be so. Amen.