

We Are The Church

Rev. John Allen

Happy Birthday Church!

Today is Pentecost, traditionally celebrated as the birthday of the Christian church.

Fifty days after Jesus' resurrection, after the disciples had seen the risen Christ ascend into heaven, they are gathered in a room when suddenly a crash of wind rattles rafters and tongues of fire from heaven reach down and touch each of their heads.

It is the fire of the Holy Spirit, the gift that Jesus had promised them, a Spirit that would come and ignite their hearts, inspire and encourage them in his absence.

The Spirit that hovered over the water of creation's first day.

The Spirit that descended like a dove upon Christ at his baptism.

That same Spirit, the breath of God, stirred up their hearts, and something extraordinary happened.

They left that room so quickly the story doesn't even have time to tell us, but suddenly they are just outside, among a great crowd of people from all over the world, and they are speaking, proclaiming the love and justice of Jesus, and the mighty deeds of God, and everyone hears them as if they were speaking their own language.

The message of God's love transcends even the limitations of language, and touches every human heart gathered there, speaking clearly, plainly, and unmistakably.

And the church was born.

That moment that the inner circle of Christ's followers became a message proclaimed to people from every corner of the earth. When the Holy Spirit came thundering down as fire and ignited a movement that moves to this day, to this moment, to us.

So, Happy Birthday Church!

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I can't help but notice this year, that the church was born when its people left the building.

That this great act of God's spirit was to lift the disciples from their seats and send place them among those who had gathered outside their walls wondering what the commotion was all about.

A crowd had gathered around because there was clearly *something* going on in that house, but their best guess had been that everyone had just had a little too much to drink... What else could explain the exuberance?

But, as Peter tells them, it was only 9 a.m. No one had been drinking. Rather the Spirit of God was at work.

As the disciples stood speaking, the Spirit imbued their meager words with the very presence of God's love, and hearts were transformed, and a movement was born.

And from there this movement quickly spread.

Prior to this story, the word church has appeared only 5 times in the whole Bible. All toward the end of the Gospel of Matthew as Jesus is talking about what things will be like when he is gone...

But after this moment, in the short bit of the bible left between Acts and the end, 72 times. The word church appears.

And not once, in all of scripture, does the word church describe a building.

It is always describes a people.

It describes the followers of Christ at work in the world. It describes a quarrelsome community learning to forgive each other. It describes a group of mutual accountability reminding each other who they are meant to be.

It names those lives that have been built together into the very body of Christ.

The church.

This is not the church.

You are the church.

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And so church is not closed, and church is certainly not cancelled. Thanks be to God.

You are the church.

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And church, the world is aching for who you are.

This Pentecost we do not see fires reaching down from heaven to inspire the faithful, rather we see fires reaching up from the ground of our cities, crying out for justice.

We see the pain black Americans whose cries have been too long ignored demanding to be heard, to have their sacred worth seen and honored.

It is long overdue that the church learn to add our voice to those cries.

The miracle of Pentecost was not that the world learned to hear the language of the church, the miracle of Pentecost was that the church learned to speak the languages of the world.

The church was born, not when the crowd suddenly woke up to what we had been saying. The church was born when we learned to proclaim the eternal truth of God's love so that it could be heard by all God's people.

And to do that, the first this the Spirit did, was stir up a mighty wind to blow the doors of their building open, and send those disciples tumbling out into the world.

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I wonder if the Spirit is up to something like that right now.

I am not saying God send this virus to teach us a lesson.

But God has never let a crisis go to waste, and maybe, just maybe, the Spirit is trying to stir our hearts once again, to remind us that we are the church, and God's world needs our witness, our cries.

That the world needs, in the words of the prophet Joel, quoted by Peter to that crowd

The world needs the visions of our young, and the dreams of our elders to come to life, not someday, not somewhere, but here. And now.

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So the question for us is not, “when will the church re-open” but rather, “how can we be the church right now.” And I want to offer a few suggestions.

First, please refuse to look away from the legacy of racism in our country. I am as tempted as anyone to change the channel in the face of pain that feels too great to bear, and often too personally convicting to tolerate. BUT, at the very least we owe the pain of our fellow humans our attention.

A few years ago I created a 22-day calendar for our church with daily suggestions for a small thing you could do each day, to begin the slow work of healing from the legacy of white supremacy in our nation. I want to point you to it again:

You can find this resource at www.fccmilton.org/race

I ask that you join me in taking these little actions each day. It is a very small thing, but it is one way for us to be the church right now. It is a way to take on our responsibility to reshape our own hearts and minds so that we can be stewards of the gospel in this moment in history.

Molli will also be sending out some resources to our families with children this week to offer some insights about things you can do as a parent to help raise children that will be part of healing the legacy of racism in our nation.

How can we be the church right now? We should not approach the pain of others with fully formed answers in our mouths, but rather listen, be challenged, learn, and grow so that we can discover the language God's love and justice will speak today.

How can we be the church right now?

What we are offering as a community of faith has never been more accessible than it is right now. You can share this service with a click. Invite a friend to join you for worship without even asking them to change out of their pajamas.

I know it can make us feel uneasy to invite someone to come into a church building for worship. But how about sharing a link. "This community has meant a lot to me. I thought you might like to check it out..."

You are the church, it is through our lives that God's spirit will transform the world. And God sends us out in every moment to those who are unlike us, those who are not a part of our inner-circles, to remind us that we do all belong to each other as God's children.

It is the church's responsibility in each new moment to learn to proclaim God's love and justice in a language that can be understood.

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This sanctuary, in which I stand today, is a perfect example of the architectural style called "New England Meeting House."

So named because that is what the founders of our church called this building. The meeting house.

It would have sounded quite strange to them to hear this building called a church.

They knew what we would do well to remember.

They were the church. We are the church.

This is the house where the church meets.

The meetinghouse is closed.

The church is open.

Thanks be to God.