

We Are Church
Pastor Sally May
May 15, 2016
First Congregational Church of Burlington, UCC

Acts 2:1-21 NRSV

2When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” 12All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” 13But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

14But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. 16No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 18Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. 19And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. 20The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. 21Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

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Today is Pentecost Sunday. Today's Christian Scripture from the Book of Acts is the story historically shared and celebrated to mark the birthday of the church. In 2016, 2000+ years later, it is not unreasonable to read this account and ask "*That is Church?*" Truly, it's almost unrecognizable: There is no building, no liturgy, no doxology, no hymns, no uniformity, no structure. In fact, by Luke's account, Church begins in the streets of Jerusalem. Language is not a barrier to understanding the message of the church. The messengers are given the power by the Holy Spirit to speak in a variety of languages so that non-believers will hear and understand. Everyone is speaking at once. The doubtful are not rejected but responded to. It is, quite honestly, the opposite of both the perception and too often the reality of the Church in today's world.

Yet, it may be this dichotomy – the tension of the church of the ancient past, the church of yesterday, and the church of today - that offers hope. Hope rooted in our call to be community – with our past, present and future. That the Church is alive is a miracle. There are not too many institutions that are older than the Church. Its success in adapting and surviving to this point, however, has been dependent upon self preservation of the institution. Church at its truest purpose is not an institution. Church at its best recognizes that it is a living organism rooted in the life and teachings of Jesus perpetuated by human beings who seek community and relationship with God and one another. Living organisms, the Church included, are not stagnant and cannot afford to be. They must constantly adapt to the ever changing environment. Additionally, survival sometimes requires not simply adaptation but real transformation.

The decline of the Church, in America, I believe, is a result of a false sense of strength and health rooted in Christendom. This was a time when the “Protestant mainline churches had been the religious establishment of the culture.”¹ It is an era that lasted into the 1960’s and its effects still resonate and arguably continue to dominate our concept of what it is to do and be Church. In this time churches reflected the identity of communities in which they existed. Congregations were homogenous in race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, political affiliations, and lifestyle.

Outside of the Church, Christendom had other effects. Society at large supported the Church. Stores and most other businesses were closed on Sundays. Remember the Blue Laws? Youth sports did not happen on Sundays. No one questioned Christmas carols at school concerts or Christian prayers at town meetings. The town green had a Nativity scene every Christmas and the Easter Bunny came to the schools.

This is not the world in which the Church finds itself today. Communities are racially, ethnically, socioeconomically, and religiously diverse. Stores and businesses are open on Sundays; creating two challenges for the Church. The first is the challenge of competition, are people going to attend worship or go to the mall. The second is that these businesses need employees so even those who might like to go to church cannot since Sunday morning continues to be primarily the only time in the week worship services are held. Sports practices and games are commonly held on Sundays.

4 years ago, on April 9, 2012 the cover of *Newsweek* read “Forget the Church: Follow Jesus.”² WOW! Is that possible?

¹ Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture*, 3.

² On the cover of *Newsweek* magazine, April 9, 2012 in reference to article by the same name by Andrew Sullivan.

Some might even perceive it as blasphemy. To separate the church from Jesus is to miss the point of Christianity, to miss the point of Jesus.

Yet, if we are to be honest is this not more a reflection on the Church than on Jesus or society. Historically speaking, the Church should be, is called to be counter culture. Jesus challenged the society in which he grew up and lived. He challenged the rules of authority and priorities of society. Jesus healed the lepers and exorcised the demons. He ate with the outcasts and spoke to the women. He welcomed the children and healed the sick. Jesus is our first and continual best example of being Church.

The Church needs to ask itself who was Jesus in the context of world history? What about Jesus' life and ministry do we need to reflect and bring back to life? What does his death and resurrection mean in the world today? What were the values of the earliest ways of becoming and being Church? What must we hold on to and what must be willing to let go of?

Jesus was a Jewish man. That he inspired a new religion illuminates the call for interfaith dialogue. His challenge to the leadership and practices of his faith are mirrors in which Christians must see themselves. He challenged fellow Jews to not seek relationship with God in religious rites, practices, and traditions as dictated by human leaders, but to empower themselves by being in right relation with one another and with God. He told his disciples "follow me," not "worship me." *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. (John 13:34)*

Jesus' ministry was in the streets, not in the synagogue. While Jesus' ministry was primarily with and directed to other Jews, scriptures suggest that he made himself accessible to anyone. Stories of the crowds who came to listen to his teachings and his interactions with

women, lepers, and the demonized suggest his expansive reach in faith, hope, and love in welcoming all into God's kingdom.

Jesus was an exorcist, healer, and performer of miracles. In today's scientific world, it is difficult, if not impossible to not take these traits out of historical context, rather extort them as proof that "Jesus was God."³ This mode of thinking suggests that we cannot do what Jesus did. It would be helpful (and hopeful) if we understood that Jesus' talent as healer and performer of miracles was not supernatural or unique in antiquity. He simply was "better than anyone else." As students in faith our challenge is to be as good as our teacher.

I, like other Christians, struggle that the universal symbol of Christianity, the cross, was and is an instrument of torture. Yet, I have learned that to deny or ignore the tortuous way in which Jesus was murdered is to undermine his life and his message. Rene Girard, a French historian and philosopher, notes that "to avert ones eyes from the sight of our real victims is a characteristic human act."⁴ Acknowledging our instinctual sense to distance ourselves from the harm we cause others offers a way to recognize Jesus' death on the Cross as another means by which Jesus forms community. As Jesus' humanity, humility, oppression, and marginalization are exposed on the Cross, we are blessed with the opportunity to recognize the humanity and humility of all who are oppressed and marginalized so that in faith we will respond.

To grasp the concept that the resurrection was "not something that happened to Jesus but to his followers,"⁵ like Jesus' parables, changes everything. It turns the idea of resurrection and transformation upside down. It allows and invites Christians to not be bystanders to the resurrection but to recognize we are the resurrection. It is through our own transformations,

³ Bart Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millenium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 199.

⁴ *Ibid*, 215.

⁵ Benjamin Valentin, Systematic Theology 614, lecture notes 2/23/12.

individually and collectively, that we will recognize our ability and the true intention of the call to respond faithfully to the words “follow me.”

So can we “forget the Church and follow Jesus” – as the *Newsweek* article title suggests? I do not think so; not Church at its finest, at its purest; not as Church is meant to be.

Before Acts, Jesus created an intentional community when he called those first disciples. His chosen were fishermen; hardworking, hard living men who lived in a land of ethnic cleansing, oppression, and where religious leaders of the day were more focused and intent on making sure that the law was followed than on people being in relationship with God. Jesus called the tired, the beaten, the weak who nevertheless persevered in the midst of adversity. He needed them and their inner strength, and he knew they would need each other. They left everything – their livelihoods, their families, their homes. Following Jesus is not easy and I do not believe can be done in solitude. Was not this possibly the earliest Church? Does Jesus Christ not continue to call the same today? “*Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first*” (Mk 10:31)

What does need to be examined is the Church’s concept of what it is to be a community of faith in 2016. Where are these communities found? How do they reflect Jesus as healer, teacher, and prophet? How do they heal, teach, and prophesy?

Today’s scripture offers hope and imagery for re-imagining Church. These apostles had to change their concept of what it was to follow Jesus because Jesus was no longer among them. No longer could they physically follow him, cheering him on, following his instructions and his footsteps. They had to become what they had learned. They had to become fully vested. After all their questions, doubts, betrayals, denials while Jesus was alive; after they hid away in fear, mourning the loss of their friend and teacher and leader; after their belief of salvation, of

becoming saved and free from all the injustice they experienced was shattered in the death of Jesus, they were transformed. Here, in their fears, grief, self-doubts Jesus appeared to them, offering his peace. Then he called on them to carry on his mission and ministry. In his faith and trust in *them*, he empowered them to be all they could, should, would be.

We are them... We are church.

God declares that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. The power of love and faith are ever so clear and beautiful in today's scripture from Acts. Fear is replaced with resolve. Confidence trumps doubt. All are one. These apostles finally got it! They got deep faith ~ the kind that will never die. Organic Christian discipleship speaks a universal language that all may understand. It is not easy, it is not quick. It requires overcoming our fears so we may let go. It requires that we ask questions and express our doubts so as to understand. It requires acknowledgement of grief and openness to lamentation so as to honor and remember our past. It requires vision so that we not only exist in the here and now but be relevant into the future. It requires recognition that it is not about personal agendas or personal gain but about the personal value of each one of us within a community who strive to be instruments of God's work and healing in the world.

Most of all it requires that *we love our God with all our heart, all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength, and that we love our neighbor as ourselves.* That is Church. Always has been, always will be. And we, First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ, are church, always have been and may we always be! Amen.