

Rev. Carrie Bail

June 4, 2017

First Congregational Church UCC of Burlington, VT.

Today includes celebrations of at least two different kinds: we are celebrating Sunday School teachers and helpers who have been sharing their gifts with us all year; and we are celebrating our high school graduates during our time of prayer.

But did you know that today we have one more celebration? It's also the birthday of the church. I'm sure that sounds funny to you children, because when you think of birthday parties there are usually decorations and games, and cake and ice cream, and especially presents! Maybe you are wondering how a building gets to have a birthday. Or maybe you wonder why we have red paraments on the lectern, and I have a red stole.

That's the first surprise. It's not the birthday of a building at all. What IS the church? It's a gathering of people, some who worship in buildings, some who don't even have buildings to gather in but meet outside, congregations all around the world, people who are followers of Jesus Christ. Today all around the globe we are remembering one very special day. On that day, the very first people who were followers of Jesus Christ, those who were his disciples and friends during the time he was living on earth, became something more than just a bunch of people grieving their friend: they became The Church.

How did that happen, on that day, that they became The Church?

Well you heard the story from the Bible just a few minutes ago. Three major things happened. First there was the wind. A BIG wind, not just a little breeze blowing through the open windows. It announced itself with a very loud noise, a roaring, saying: something really special is happening here now: pay attention!

Next there was fire, flames really. Now that could've been really scary, to suddenly have flames of fire inside the building, especially if it were a wooden one like this. But those flames didn't burn anything up. No, they came down to rest on the shoulders of each one of Jesus' friends and they didn't burn. Instead they were a source of inspiration – quite literally – to inspire means to draw in the breath of God, the power of God's spirit being given to each and every one of Jesus' friends.

The third thing that happened was inside each one of those people and it was a miracle of communication. All of a sudden they could tell the stories of Jesus – the gospel stories – in languages they had never heard before but suddenly they were able to speak in those languages. So all the people of many countries who had gathered there could understand in their own language, stories about who Jesus was and what his life was all about. It was the beginning of Jesus' story spreading all over the world.

That was the birthday of the church. Maybe it is a little bit different from the birthday parties you have gone to: in them, the guest of honor usually gets presents. In this story, the Holy Spirit doesn't receive anything from the people: instead, the Holy Spirit is the one giving away the gifts. It was all of those attending the party, the worshippers, who got the presents.

So: what did they receive? What were the gifts? What do WE receive as we celebrate this day called Pentecost?

It's too bad that in our country, we don't make a very big deal about Pentecost. In the beginning years of our faith, it was the next big holy day after Easter in the early church, and it was celebrated before Christmas was ever honored.

Pentecost came from an early Jewish holiday, called the Festival of Weeks, or Shavuot: it is seven times seven days (49) after Passover. So we always celebrate Pentecost seven weeks after Easter.

Originally it was a celebration of the harvest ingathering of the first crop planted, and at the same time it was a commemoration of Moses' journey up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. During the years of Roman rule, Jewish people became more and more dispersed throughout the Mediterranean area. But at the time of Shavuot, they all tried to get "home" to the temple in Jerusalem, to commemorate the giving of the Law by Moses. There were lots of Pilgrims on the road during this time, and so the setting for the Pentecost story is the city of Jerusalem, bursting with travelers, with Pilgrims, speaking many languages. They were there to remember Moses' meeting with God on the mountain, but also his return from the heights to share God's rules for living together, the Ten Commandments, to make life down in the valleys better.

The Christian communal holiday of Pentecost, the birth of the church, we shouldn't think as some individualistic story of a hero meeting God; it is more about God's Spirit descending down into the midst of all the people in the form of the Holy Spirit, bringing a new identity, and a new purpose into the hearts of the people.

There are so many parts of this story that deserve our attention, but it's the gift of communication that grabs my attention. It is often seen as the reversal of another Old Testament tale, and that is the Tower of Babel. Do you remember soon after the story of Noah's ark, there were a group of people who were so proud that they wanted to build a tower to reach heaven itself? God did not like their pride, and so confused their language, breaking it into many languages, so that they could no longer cooperate in trying to reach up into God's heaven.

At Pentecost the process is reversed. All of a sudden, instead of being unable to communicate with one another, people can understand each another, and by extension, they can appreciate one another. All those people that were named in the scripture? Parthians and Medes, Elamites and Mesopotamians, people from Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and Libya. Once they could understand each other, they could no longer point to someone as being “Other”, someone who is different and not like us. Pentecost reverses the human error of exclusion.

Once we understand each other’s language, then we can also try to observe and appreciate one another’s customs and values. People of many cultures, languages and ethnicities can find themselves welcome in God’s family.

To be able to hear someone in their native language – to really hear them – means to recognize they exist, to bring them into the realm of being real people just like us. Every one is important in his or her own personhood, every one bears gifts that can benefit the whole community. Individual people mattered to Jesus, just as they should matter to us. A basic part of the meaning of Pentecost is that we can now transcend exclusiveness and welcome others with open arms and hearts.

Pentecost is about receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, its inspiration and its comfort. It is not about trying to make ourselves into gods. Indeed, it is the Spirit which gifts us with a special power, the ability to communicate, reaching out into the world horizontally, as friends and servants to one another. Celebrating the birthday of the church with many people with all kinds of different languages and clothes and customs, is about rejoicing in the diversity of language and culture and ethnicity. Pentecost is about the birth of community, the coming together of all people who seek to be God’s servants. May we take to heart this ancient lesson and celebrate community and

diversity instead of excluding those who are different from us. Celebrate the inclusive and welcoming gifts of the Spirit today, and everyday. Amen.

Benediction:

Go out into the world, and labor to bring forth new life.

And may the God who breathed life into creation be your joy,

May the Christ give hope to your dreaming,

and may the Holy Spirit set your hearts ablaze with a passion for peace.

Go in peace to love and serve God. Amen.

Introduction of the Graduates (with Lucy's help)

Let us pray:

On this joyful day, God of our families, God of our futures, we give thanks for all the young people in our midst who have completed a course of study ready to take that diploma off into the next steps of their journey. They have worked hard to achieve this moment and we, their family and church family, are rightly pleased with their success. Just as they have received the gift of an education, help them to remember it is not solely for their own gain, but one which they are called to give back to others in some form of service. May they be grateful for all the help they have received from family and teachers, friends, and mentors in the church; and may they remember the gifts of the Spirit given to them by this community as they go off to their next adventures in life.

We also acknowledge the many graduates who could not be here with us on this day, all of whom we will support and encourage as we are able, at the very least with our prayers. We ask that you go with them, Advocating God, as they go forth from this place. Amen.