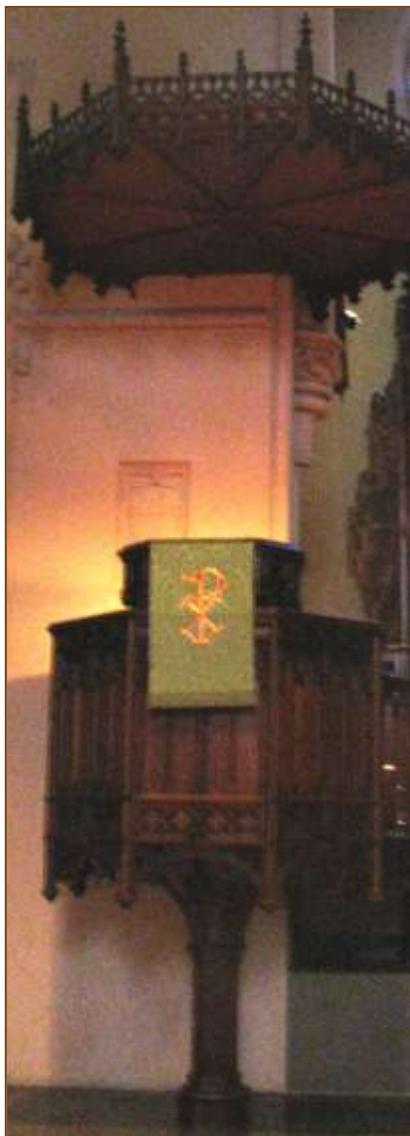


June 8, 2014
Pentecost

Sermons

from a church with a conscience



“Of Birthdays and Coming
Out Parties”

by

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What would it mean at this critical moment in human affairs did we in the churches show growing graces and services! A church with a conscience out in front of its age and outdistancing its own best past, in a sense of responsibility for an entire world, in its stand for economic justice, in its demand for, and illustration of, mutual honor and fellowship among races – a church with members whose convictions and characters were ahead of their contemporaries, so that it pulled them forward and lifted them Godward! Then both we on the inside and those on the outside would be in no doubt that Christ is alive and in the midst of His churches and is using them to guide and inspire the world.

Henry Sloane Coffin,
Preaching at the Church of the Covenant,
June 11, 1944

“Of Birthdays and Coming Out Parties”

Acts 2: 1–8

Acts 10–11:18 Selected

We gather at the table of the Lord this morning, a miniature image of Gods great banquet that should forever resemble that poem about the Salvation Army’s founder:

*Booth led boldly with his big bass drum—
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)
The Saints smiled gravely and they said: “He’s come.”
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)
Walking lepers followed, rank on rank,
Lurching braves from the ditches dank,
Drabs from the alleyways and drug fiends pale—
Minds still passion-ridden, soul-powers frail:—
Vermin-eaten saints with mouldy breath,
Unwashed legions with the ways of Death—
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)
He saw King Jesus. They were face to face,
And he knelt a-weeping in that holy place.
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb? (1)*

It was probably just as chaotic; that account of the first Pentecost. It makes progressive modern Christians nervous. A mixed multitude of people gathered like the United Nations, all of a sudden hearing the same message without interpreters. It reminds you of church folk labeled by the same name. Unlike God’s “chosen frozen” they think nothing of swinging their hands in the air, standing in praise, and in some cases flopping around on the floor.

I remember preaching in my mother’s little African Methodist Episcopal congregation when a kindly older lady shouted, “Now tell us son!” I lost three pages. A bit befuddled, she rescued me by saying, “Come on now, we’re here to help you.” To this day I love preaching to a responsive gathering. If nothing else it keeps the “sleepers awake.”

Pentecost was the birthday of the Christian church, yet in truth that’s not exactly the case. It was really the insurgence of a new way of thinking for an

old and trusted faith tradition, one that had a way of worshiping the creator of all of life, as the one and only God in a world of many idols. A faith that recognized the liberation of people and the generosity of this God, knowing they were called to show the rest of the world how accepting this Creator was and is.

Trouble was, that religion was made up of human beings and human nature, what it is, people over the years become more and more selective, more and more rule-conscious for the protection of God who really doesn't need protecting. As human nature goes, there is that incessant need to make God into human form, small enough to fit into little minds allowing ritual, dogmatism, and law to replace unconditional love. So along came Jesus to remind God's people of who God is again, and of course we did him in. It's really that simple. Power politics, established religion and ritual were threatened, so they had to shore up their security systems and "the best defense is a good offense." They got rid of the threat.

Except it would seem that we're talking here about a "living God" that moves when and where the wind blows, a God of light and fire unencumbered by language or holy curtains or any kind of human imaginings. So Pentecost was really just a new movement within an "old, old story of God's glory." Moreover, this new "way" seemed to be infectious; "the scent of love drawing strangers off the streets and into communities of grace." Like their teacher, these "Jesus people" saw no reason to exclude and the walls of prejudice "came a tumbling down." But then another problem raised its head. This grand new adventure within that "old time religion" was still made up of human beings. Before long there started to be the re-insertion of rules, the re-adoption of old ways, just to keep things pure and right for God, of course.

I've been recalling the first time I stood in this pulpit. The excitement I had and from what I heard, the same was the case for a lot of you. Granted, over these years some of us have had a disagreement or two, but always we pressed for the good of this great place and for God's purpose through her. Some faithful saints have gone to an even better shore. Some have moved to other parts of the country. One or two have left disgruntled, but for the most part people tend to just get bored. That too is human nature, to take things for granted. After all, how's this church any different than any other except of

course for our great music and the beauty of this refurbished sanctuary? One week leads into the next and attendance drops off because the on-lookers drop back into Sunday oblivion and others figure "I'm only one person; no one will miss me." We forget that we gather here not for ourselves but for the person sitting next to us or in front of us and most of all for God so that we might say a simple "thank you."

Starting next week this church in covenant with God and this community will officially begin another new chapter, and I pray Amy Starr Redwine will have not only the same success I enjoyed but also have that chance without some of the angst that some felt necessary to level right from the start. The problem is, human nature being what it is, doing the right things and guiding God's people to be "God like" has never been an easy undertaking clear back to the beginnings of our faith.

That's why there are at least two birthday events recorded in the book of Acts, and if you want to call Pentecost a birthday, then you might see the second event as a "coming out party." First there was that new movement within God's chosen people, selected not for their goodness but that they might expose God's grace to the world. It came about as everyone began hearing the same message. Yet as we now know, even that endeavor began to lapse into old patterns. So that "spirit thing" had to start messing around again. And along came Peter, a first-hand witness to Jesus' ways. This was not Paul the persecutor. He had yet to be knocked off his high horse. No, this was the rock upon which Jesus' enlightened faith had spread like wild fires caught in the Santa Anna winds. But Peter and the church leaders couldn't help themselves, they were human and they still wanted to cling to old ways like babies with their night-nights. Except Peter got visited by this spirit thing; he was "called" if you will, to something unimaginable; "eat snakes," those belly-crawling reptiles that got poor Eve in trouble. Here was Peter, invited into the house of a "un-believer." Peter, put into the awful position of turning his back on all of his comfort zones. Where does this take us on this Sunday when you have welcomed the future of the church into your ranks and start getting ready for a brave new day? What's the spirit going to whisper as we break bread and drink the cup around the banquet table of the Lord that needs to include General Booth and all his friends off the streets.

What will we hear as we utter the words, "Do this and remember" so that we don't repeat human nature?

If you go further into the accounts of the early church, listen to the salutations and accusations of Paul to the various congregations springing up because of the acceptance being communicated first on Pentecost and then reimagined on Peter's bed sheet. If you go all the way forward to the Book of Revelation and the seven churches described you hear time and again about God's people having to revisit the "reason of their being," why God put them where they were. One church endured patiently while another suffered persecution, but of the rest, one is summoned to repent, another forgot about loving, and still another harbored false prophets. One was so wishy-washy the people were accused of not standing for anything while another was admonished for falling asleep. Fact is, the first congregation to go out of business was first church Jerusalem, its decline beginning just after fifty A.D. because of its incessant debate over how they had always done things before. This is the Achilles heel of all human understandings about our creator God who is only interested with "trading in futures" and followers who will "own their tomorrows." (2)

People stories and God's story, hopefully this day will remind us that the God we claim to follow, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Deborah, Ruth and Sarah, the creator who was exposed again in Jesus Christ and again on Pentecost and again with Peter and on down through the ages, even to what happens today in this congregation. Hopefully this reminds you that every gathering of God's people should always remember to be about God and nothing else.

It's what we acknowledge when singing that old hymn that paraphrase's the 100th Psalm:

"Know that the Lord is God, without our aid did us make," and why? Because, "God is good with a mercy that is ever sure, with truth that at all times has firmly stood and shall from age to age endure."

Our faith is about God's infinite wisdom, never about our little minds and ways. It's about God's inclusive acceptance, regardless of human nature, human forgetfulness and human misunderstanding even when it is

unintentional. God's love will "ever-be." It will "ever-be" because God's spirit will continue to remind us that we are members of a fellowship that exceeds our capacity to define or understand and that we must never worship who we are or where we have been. Our only "reason to be" is to help others hear God's way in their own voices.

Those who gathered in the city heard the good news as they were, where they were, and they were never the same. This day is about many things but most of all it's about the flames of creativity and being bold for the future! It's about the gift of understanding and the ever present possibility of re-birth through the rediscovering of whom and whose we are.

Friends, as you now stand on the edge of the holy spirit's new movements may you have nothing but heartwarming, fiery days ahead of you!

- 1) Vachel Lindsay, "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven"
- 2) Charles Schwab Investments



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Convinced of God's grace, the Church of the Covenant strives to be a caring and compassionate congregation, welcoming all people regardless of age, race, national origin, marital status, gender, affectional orientation, and mental or physical ability.