

Sometimes people call Pentecost “the birthday of the church” but that phrase never sat well with me. It always sounded too neat, too simple, too cute for my comfort. Later I realized my real problem with the phrase runs deeper. For one thing, the church has its origin and identity in Easter; Pentecost marks the initiation of the church’s mission. So rather than a birthday, Pentecost is more like an inauguration or commissioning — still very important! So much so that [at the 10:30 service/after in the service], we’ll be offering a special blessing for everyone graduating; we didn’t decide to do that today because it’s Pentecost, we just got lucky that way.

Besides, the birthday comparison just doesn’t work. Birthdays can be wonderful celebrations, but they ask no greater commitment than attending a party or offering a gift, and birthdays confer a strictly individualistic sort of attention, focusing on one person and one moment, and then returning to the status quo. Most of all, our own birthdays are an occasion to celebrate ourselves and put aside any thoughts of challenge beyond the inexorable increasing of our days.

Pentecost could hardly be more different. Nowadays we may focus on the inner circle of the twelve, and their receiving enlightenment and distinction, but St. Luke emphasizes the engagement with the outside world that the Spirit initiated, and the twelve eagerly embraced. Drawn in by curiosity, or perhaps concern, a wonderfully diverse crowd gathered. And they heard the joyful proclamation of the powerful deeds of God. Today isn’t about the foundation of an institution, but rather the initiation of a movement that continues in our own day, despite the best efforts of the world to stamp it out or corrupt it, and a movement that has included each of us from the moment of our baptism.

Christians have found a few different ways to describe the church’s mission. The reconciliation of God and the world. Revealing Jesus to the world in word and in deed. Making disciples of all nations. Seeking and serving Christ in all persons. Enacting and proclaiming love of God, love of our neighbors, and love of our fellow Christians. These may lead to different emphases in style and practice, but it’s not difficult to see these definitions as growing out of the same gospel of grace and hope. The trouble comes when the world starts to see what the Church is doing, or rather, what the Spirit is accomplishing through the Church, and tries to shut us down, or confuse us, or divert us, or confuse people about us.

We should hardly be surprised at the world’s hostility to the Church. On the simplest level, no one likes to change, and the Church is trying to change the world. God’s plan of salvation was necessitated by, and accomplished by, human rejection of God. In the first days after the resurrection, the disciples lived in hiding, fearing for their lives. On the very day of Pentecost, in the sight of a miracle, some sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” The rest of the book of Acts interweaves accounts of oppression and martyrdom with the spread of the Gospel, the apostles’ words and deeds of healing and hope. Yet the Holy Spirit encouraged them, gave them joy in place

of fear, and ensured the growth of the Church, both in size and in grace.

The same dynamic is at work in our own day. In the Middle East, oppression and violence have eliminated the Christian presence from many countries. Closer to home, the Church is under a different sort of attack, an attack unconstrained by physicality; the same sort of attack the church endured on the day of Pentecost. Surveys of Americans show that the words Christianity and Church now mean very different things to non-Christians than they do to Christians.

For us, Church is where we gather for renewal, fellowship, and inspiration, where we reach out in service and compassion to people in need. We count on encountering Jesus here in word and in sacrament. But to others, more and more, the words Christian and Church mean something very different. Surveys of religiously unaffiliated young adults show they associate those words with homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, anti-intellectualism, judgment, bigotry, hypocrisy, greed, sanctimony, and violence. You know, all the things Jesus *didn't* endorse, and in many cases, actively opposed. But as more people know only ugly lies and caricatures, and fewer people know Jesus, it's no wonder that so many people want nothing to do with church; they have come to believe these loudly-repeated lies.

How we got here is a long story. It's certainly true that some individuals claiming to act in the name of Jesus have engaged in un-Christian speech and behavior. And like every other group, Christians do not have a perfect behavioral record, so people who are looking for reasons to condemn Christianity as a whole can always find examples of Christians who failed to live up to Jesus's vision and claim the whole thing is therefore a sham. (Of course, those people are selective about which groups they treat that way.) But: the notion that Jesus, his Gospel, and his Church are inherently evil, in any way, is a lie straight from the pit of hell. It's also true that faithful Christians have become too inward-looking, and too reluctant to challenge the lies we do become aware of.

These are ancient problems with an ancient solution. Jesus gave us that solution himself. He sent the Holy Spirit to overcome the world's lies about sin and righteousness and judgment. He identified the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth. And because he was filled with the Spirit, because he embraced the Spirit, in turn the Spirit moved Peter to refute the lie of sneering onlookers, boldly but without hostility, but instead with integrity and grace. Thereby Peter set an example for all Christians to follow.

The same Spirit is with us, ready to encourage, enliven, and equip us to proclaim the truth about God and the awesome love God has for the world, to dissolve lies as swiftly as light dissolves darkness, to move the world closer to God with the sweeping authority of the wind that touches all things.

We can't grasp the Holy Spirit, and for all her power she will not affect us against our will, but we can embrace her and take part in her mission of truth offered in love. The Spirit's truth will set us free, to love and to be loved, but not just for our benefit.

Sacred truth will also set the world free to enjoy the same love and peace that God has intended for the world since before the Spirit moved over the waters of Creation.

So I hope and pray that we follow the lead of the twelve who became apostles on the Day of Pentecost, and their successors, who are always at their best when they follow where the Spirit is guiding them, into all the truth. We who have embraced the life and truth of the Spirit can see our experiences and visions of God as heralding the beginning of a new and greater life than we ever could have conceived. We can live with the confidence that comes from believing that God really is pouring out the Spirit upon all flesh. Following the Spirit's lead, and the apostles' examples, we can live the Christian life and proclaim the Good News so boldly that we inspire the imagination and wonder of the world.