

“Making our Pentecostal Way in a Real World”

Acts 2, Romans 8

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June 3, 2001 (Pentecost)

This day marks the beginning of the season of the Church. You will note that there are only two candles on the altar; the Christ candle has been removed. On Ascension Thursday, the story has it that Jesus Christ was ascended and the disciples were left perplexed as to his whereabouts. As the theologian Karl Barth put it, “from before their eyes, he disappeared before their eyes.”

Ten days after Ascension Thursday is the Pentecost, or what we have come to call the “birthday of the Church.”

And on this day, the 3rd of June of 2001, I complete 25 years of ministry. On June 6th of 1976 I was ordained at Bethel Church in Arlington, Virginia. I had secured a call to ministry at St. Paul’s United Church of Christ in Chicago and on the basis of that call, the Potomac Association of the United Church of Christ agreed to ordain me into the Christian ministry. Just as we were to enter the sanctuary of Bethel Church that Sunday afternoon to begin my ordination service, we received a telegram from Chicago. They didn’t have e-mail in those days; they barely had telephones. Pastor Frederick Trost had sent a telegram with these three words: “Come Holy Spirit.” The telegram may have had more than that, but I only remember those three words. “Come Holy Spirit.” And on that day I entered the real world of the church.

I say real world because the Church exists, for better or for worse, in the real world as a real world institution. All of us would wish that the church were an ideal and utopian institution, but it is just a real institution in the real world. And I am forever grateful for all that it has taught me about living gracefully in a largely ungraceful world.

As a way of reflecting on my 25 years I got out my sermons from my first two years in ministry. They are filled with the memories of a new father who too often used his then year-and-a-half-year-old daughter’s discoveries about life as sermon illustrations.

It was in that Chicago parish that I first became a Cubs fan, and I learned last night that the Cubs’ current 12-game winning streak sets a club record that goes back to 1936, which was 10 years before I was born and 5 years before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. But I digress, as I always have. I don’t think I ever used the Cubs baseball team as a sermon illustration except maybe as an illustration of the illusory character of the human endeavor.

As I was going through old sermons, removing steel clips that had left rust marks on the paper, I came across some interesting observations. I've always been a journalistic preacher, as you may have discovered. I am an observer of things around me and use these things as sermon illustrations. Nothing goes to waste. And most of these illustrations are about the real church making its Pentecostal way in the real world.

I read a review of a book written by a Lutheran professor of preaching, who reflects upon life in his first parish almost 40 years ago. His first church was a rural parish in Iowa which had fallen on hard times. The cross on top of the church was missing one of its arms because it was not solid brass, but rather brass wrapped around a wood core which had long ago rotted away. He almost didn't get out of his car when he drove to the parish to preach his trial sermon. But he took the pulpit at that church and served it for two years. It was a real church making its Pentecostal way in a real world.

There was a cemetery behind and up the hill from the church and, to his family's horror, their own supply of drinking water was polluted by the drainage from the cemetery and the church leadership wouldn't come up with the money to fix the problem. This pastor and his family joked about not being able to drink the water because of its abnormally high Lutheran content.

Real churches making their Pentecostal way in the real world.

At the end of my first year of ministry I was assigned to preach the sermon on Christmas Day. I was low man on a three-pastor totem pole. We had two services on Christmas eve and one on Christmas day. And, fresh out of seminary, I got Christmas Day. I found that sermon as I rummaged through my reflections.

It began with my commentary on the Messiah Concert that had just been conducted at the church the week before. St. Paul's Church, which was built by families such as Oscar Mayer and Wieboldt, sat 1100 people but only had about 250 folks in worship on any given Sunday. But at these Messiah concerts every year, the place was packed. I began my Christmas morning observations about my having attended the concert the week before Christmas.

I must have attended the evening concert alone, with Sally was at home taking good care of our toddler daughter. I snuck into the balcony early to get a good seat, according to my Christmas sermon. I brought along a good book to read while the place filled up. It was interesting, I noted, to be anonymous in one's own house of worship. The concert-goers were a strange mix of church and non-church people.

Soon two young men came along and sat down beside me. The two gentlemen were obviously well educated and erudite. One had a deep and resonant voice which could be heard above the noise of the gathering assembly. Since they did not know that I

was one of the ministers of this house of worship, they began making frank comments about their surroundings.

“Very fifties,” said the one with the resonant voice. “No transepts,” he noted. “No tabernacle.” After correctly naming all the various parts of the church’s architecture, he then said, “This must be a very large parish. They must have a school.”

What he didn’t know is that the parish had been built in the fifties after a fire destroyed the old church in 1956. And that it was paid for in 4 years because one of its members was Oscar Mayer, as in as in “My baloney has a first name, it’s O S C A R, my baloney has a second name, it’s “M A Y E R ...” Remember?

After a pause in his observations about this large church, the man with the resonant voice said, “It’s just amazing how many people still believe. There are literally millions of them. It’s just so absurd.”

At that point I wanted to play the role of the first-year pastor just out of seminary and quote Tertullian, one of the Church fathers who said, “Credo quiam absurdum.” Which means, “I believe because it is absurd.” Wouldn’t it have been just one of those marvelous intellectual coups? One of those moments you can only dream of? He says, “It’s just so absurd.” And I reply, almost under my breath, “credo quiam absurdum.” He would say, “What?” And I would just respond, “Tertullian.” And turn my face back to the gathering choir in the chancel. Only in my dreams. But alas, I either missed the moment or a fit of humility overcame me. I don’t remember.

Such was the nature of my first year of ministry in a formerly wealthy parish that had seen many more well-attended days. A real parish trying to make its Pentecostal way in an altogether real world.

But at the end of the day, I’ve always loved the church just as it is, not as it ought to be, or as it could be if Jesus were sitting right here in the pews with us. The church as recorded in the book of Acts is a wondrously real church. The Pentecostal experience fades pretty quickly, and by the 6th chapter they’re already arguing with one another, ready to split into pieces. But somehow the witness of these broken communities that dare call themselves by the name of Christ continues in time and space. And that can only be the work of the Holy Spirit.

And so I am most grateful for that long-ago telegram that greeted me on the afternoon of my ordination: “Come, Holy Spirit.”

And so it shall ever be.

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