May 31st , 2020

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Pentecost

**The Birth of the Church**

I. The Holy Spirit

This morning we celebrate many things, primarily the coming of the Holy Spirit upon us. We often have the opportunity to focus upon the Creator and Jesus, his Son, but this morning we have the unique gift to really center ourselves in the knowledge of the Spirit. We remember this morning that the Spirit didn’t just show up to these folks in the book of Acts, but the Holy Spirit, she has been around since the very beginning of the world. She swept over the waters, she guided the prophets, she interceded on behalf of God’s children. In the Old Testament, she’s often referred to as ‘Wisdom’ – this gift of being able to discern what is right and what is wrong. She journeys with people, with us, throughout the course of time, and by her guiding and nudging, we are a people who are called by the Spirit to do incredible work in the here and now.

This morning we celebrate the Holy Spirit and our gratitude for her movement and discernment in all we do when she is invited in. We also celebrate that as she descended upon these individuals in Acts, that this is the real beginning of what we know as the first church. The people are moved, they recognize that something beyond themselves is happening, and they hear that call to begin a movement, which again, we would later understand as church.

We are not told much about that first encounter with the Holy Spirit, in regards to buildings or spaces. Sometimes we hear that people meet in an upper room, or they meet together in a house, but there’s no talk of true institution. No one shares about the gorgeous stained glass or the particular stunning chalice – it wasn’t the building, it was the people. That same movement is relevant to us today, perhaps even more than ever, where we can claim that the church, the true church, is not a building or an institution, it’s a people who love God, serve God, and follow the discernment of the Holy Spirit not only on a Sunday morning, but all week long.

II. Happy Birthday!

So, we wish the church a very happy birthday. And through the years, we’ve seen the church transform over and over again. There’s been some bad years in there, some crusades, some poor choices, some discrimination, – and the church is a people, and people have faults and failures and have sinned– the church was never perfect, nor will it ever be. Yet there’s been many good steps that the church has made towards inclusion, justice, and radical movements that have changed the world for good. The church is a people – in it’s sin, in it’s success, we come together this morning to give thanks for the church and the life and community it has given us here today.

The church is truly a people. This is a sidebar, but an important one – whenever I hear people angry at the church in the many ways church has been harmful throughout the years, I listen. And I validate that anger, I recognize that we, as a church, have sinned, deeply, when called to follow the Holy Spirit, we followed our own greedy desires. People have a right to be mad at church, but what I wish I could acknowledge to those who struggle is that the church is a people, people sin and people succeed, and as a church we have the responsibility to ask for forgiveness in the times and ways in which we’ve hurt one another. One of the best ways we can be the church is to acknowledge the realities that we see and take responsibility and humble ourselves.

Yet, because the church is a people, the anger can get in the way of seeing how the church really does act as a wonderful vessel of God’s power and God’s leading through the people. To those who have been hurt by the church, we affirm and validate your story and call you to share it, and we pray that you may find healing and wholeness and perhaps in time, you might enter church in a different or new way.

III. The Church is a People

On the birthday of the church, at the celebration of God’s Spirit among us, we acknowledge both the good and bad. Birthday’s offer a unique opportunity – to reflect on the past, look at the present, and decide the trajectory of the future. Today, we have the chance to really ask – what is the church, admit our faults and successes, and really meditate and move through tangible actions to follow the Spirit more closely.

So, what do you wish to bring to the birthday feast? What gift will you choose to offer? What ways will you look at your life and the life of this world and seize the opportunity to see the church anew?

This morning we are putting in action something that has been said over the years – the church is not a building, the church is a people. Well, here we are, a sanctuary that echoes my words but no one to hear in the pews. Yes, I wish you were all here, but what we’ve done in this crisis is learned in hard ways, challenging ways, how to be the church when you can’t enter the building. You and I are now forced to live that reality – and while Zoom has it’s own set of quirks, we recognize that we can rise above as a church and still be the church in a new way. As it turns out, and we see this throughout the course of time – from the book of Acts to right here and right now – the church will always exist, it may look different, it may have it’s challenges, it may be something new and something wonderful – but the church, the Creator, Spirit, and Son will continue to bring us together.

IV. Social Justice

So, how will we be church today? How will we let the Spirit guide us? There’s opportunities everywhere, and at times, it can be ultimately overwhelming, but there’s always a chance to live out God’s call. We all have different things, different topics where we find our passion, and while we recognize as a collective church that we are called to all things, we also recognize that as a people, God has put particular things on our hearts.

For some, it will be the brutal new reminders of the real injustice of racism that is upon our country and world. For some, it will be the homeless and hungry, the food deserts, that make your heart ache. For some, it will be the hostile ways we pollute our world and endanger God’s great creation. For some, it will human trafficking, and other forms of abuse. For some, it will be the call for all people to receive health care and move towards the health of all people in all places. And so on, and so on, and so on. You can fill in the blank, whatever makes your heart tick, whatever pulls you to your knees, whatever makes your soul cries out – listen, listen, the Holy Spirit is right there in it and with you – there’s your call, so how are you going to respond to the call?

If you need an example, I can tell you my call – even though it is a bit obtuse. My call is to embody the love of Christ that I have felt and share that love with all people that they may know they are beloved and worthy. I answer the call through my interactions with people, through my service to God in this ministry, and the call often leads me to the wallflower in the room, wanting to validate them, wanting to hear their story. The call takes on many forms, and so my actions and response also takes on many forms.

I hope that today, as we celebrate the Holy Spirit and the gift of the church, you reflect upon what call you have been given and how you might seek to answer it. If you are grappling with this call, what it means, we can talk – or you can talk with one of your fellow congregants – we can build each other up in God’s love. Wherever you are called, whatever you do, may you know the deep love and abiding of the Holy Spirit, this day and every day. Amen.