

Spirit Fire and You
Acts 2.1-22 and I Corinthians 12.3-13
June 4, 2017
Pentecost Sunday
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Pentecost preparation this year has felt a lot like standing in two places at once. Maybe it's because my hours here at the church are divided lately between our construction project down the hall and the ongoing tasks of our faith community. That means my head is in the weekly planning but also in the future planning—tending to projects of deferred maintenance and dreaming of what will be. I'm doing that in my parenting life right now, too, as I spend these summer months in between the parenting years of elementary school and middle school. Letters and emails are arriving constantly and begin, "Dear Middle School Parents." Everyone ahead of me is making certain I know the zip zoom to college is even faster than the zip zoom to 5th grade graduation. As if I need the unsolicited reminders that time is a fickle friend.

These in-between places are exhilarating and terrifying; full of hope and excitement, grief and loss. I see and hear similar emotions from those friends and family shifting from hurried, work days to open, retired days—excitement for what may be, degrees of sadness releasing what has been. Or great excitement for what may be and degrees of anxiety over funding and sustaining that vision for retirement. I spent time with a 93-year-old dear one recently who is physically strong, mentally clear, able to travel and engage with her great-grandchildren as an active, present part of their lives. And in the midst of that great joy she simultaneously describes, with a gracious candor, the loneliness of having buried her spouse, all of her siblings, and all of her closest friends. These in-between places hold our identities before us in a spotlight, and we aren't always confident, calm, and enthusiastic about that kind of scrutiny. Who am I now? Who am I becoming? How will I change? What will this new life be like? What if I can't control what happens next?

On this birthday of the church, are these the wrong questions to ask? Perhaps not when you've celebrated a couple thousand birthdays. To not ask what comes next always reminds me of the darling man I knew in Virginia who had just celebrated his 101st birthday when he peacefully passed away. A friend of mine met with the family to make funeral arrangements, and his daughter said, "It's just such a shock. We didn't see this coming at all." I think our lives are often like that. We do not wish to inhabit the in-between places and end up missing them altogether until we're fully on the other side.

Kids grow up, friends move away, working years pass, bodies age, and people die. Cycles of change and transition, evolution of identity and life, these are the constants we either choose to ignore or choose to engage as we are living our lives. And I'm thinking on these things as we mark another birthday of the church universal today because I want us to choose to engage the constants of change, transition, identity, and life together.

We're not altogether wrong to celebrate this day as the birthday of the church...but we're not entirely right, either. The stories we tell and the boldness we celebrate all have to do with the in-between place of an emerging movement. Jesus has passed on, risen up, been taken away by the cloud, and the Jesus Way is being born as Christianity. These Pentecost stories are not marking the creation of an institution to enshrine and maintain, and I am particularly drawn to that note this year. New Testament Professor Margaret Aymer notes, "[The Pentecost story] describes not the birth of the church, but rather the empowerment of the believers to bear witness to the ends of the earth, as promised in Acts 1:8."¹ What we celebrate today is not buildings that were erected, bylaws and committees that were set in place, Robert's Rule of Order that was memorized as the 5th gospel. What we celebrate today is the fiery Spirit of God that takes who we are and begins swirling around and within us, tugging at the gifts and talents and passions within us, pulling them to the surface, and sending us out as little fires to make good trouble and real change in our world in the way and name of Jesus. With the Spirit's help, we were empowered on that day, and again in our lifetimes, to push against culture and stand against empire even if it killed us. But something went wrong along the way, and in at least half of the world, church stopped pushing against culture and became culture; church stopped standing against empire and became empire.

As we find ourselves on the other side of that process, we must honestly see and hear that the church in the West is standing at a new in-between place in our story. Are we are the daughter of the 101-year-old man who is surprised to learn he won't live 101 more? Hold some narratives together with me as we move forward. We have two texts before us today of swirling Spirit (in Acts) and Spirit gifts (in I Corinthians) for passionate service and mission cultivated and finessed by the Spirit that we might conspire for goodness. How far removed are we from the truth in these scenes of consuming, radical, personal involvement in the way of Jesus? And what does Spirit Fire have to do with the next part of our own story as we add another candle to the birthday cake of the church?

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3282

Across our country, I think it is accurate to say we have more attachment and affection for the institutions where we experience church than we do for the swirling Spirit that calls us to be part of the great movement of God. In fact, for much of the 20th century members of local congregations could easily sit as passive audience and watch as a small group within the institution acted out the essence of church. This was often joked of as the 80/20 rule—20% of the church does 80% of the work and 20% of the church gives 80% of the money needed to fund the work of the church. And for a long time, you could be in the 80% of those who took great comfort in being a sometimes church attender who didn't do much, didn't give much, didn't change much about his/her life in light of the teachings of Christ and yet still identify as Christian. We are at the end of that reality. Something is coming. Something is here. A new fire is starting to burn that will call us into another story, and the in-between-ness of this moment is both exhilarating and terrifying, and I wonder if the 20% becomes the remnant that will follow the Spirit Fire into whatever is on its way. Stick with me. Stick with me in the in-between time and the years of transition ahead. Hold onto the stories and to the questions as we consider who we are and what comes next.

I have been sitting with all of these questions and thoughts as I've read John Philip Newell's *The Rebirthing of God* in recent days. He begins by quoting, "Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth-century Christian mystic, [who] said most simply but most radically that we are not just made by God, we are made of God. We are not just fashioned from afar by a distant Creator. We are born from the very womb of the Divine...It is to say that the creativity of God is deep within us, deeper than any barrenness in our lives or relationships, deeper than any endings in our families or our world. Within us—as a sheer gift of God—is the capacity to bring forth what has never been before, including what has never been imagined before. Above all else, as Julian says, the love-longings of God are at the heart of our being."

I think Julian says it better than the Apostle Paul who tells us the same Spirit, same Lord, same God activates varieties of gifts, various services, and varieties of activities in all of us. The love-longings of God are at the heart of our beings—we live this out in all kinds of ways, but we are called and equipped and blessed to live out our love-longings for the common good. Our birth story is an action story. Always. Immediately. Our visions and dreams, our distinct personalities and preferences, are signs of the presence of God at the heart of our beings. And the swirling whole of who we are is to be used for the great good of God's world.

Our texts this morning tell of the language of people being heard in ways that enable them to connect and be known by one another. The skills and joys and unique personalities of individuals flourish not just for the good of a faith community but for

the common good of the world. These are simultaneously origin stories and rebirth stories. Newell speaks of rebirthing as “what is deepest in us coming forth again” and “what is at the heart of all things—made of God—being set free to emerge in radically new ways.” In *The Rebirthing of God* Newell “is pointing to a radical reemergence of the Divine from deep within us. We do not have to create it. We cannot create it. But we can let it spring forth and be reborn in our lives. We can be part of midwifing new holy births in the world.”²

Newell says this as part of a truth that is terrifying to most of us in here. It’s not that we don’t know it and that we haven’t said it out loud, but we still think we are immune to it. Heck, I think I am immune to it and am wondering what will become of me and what I will leave for my children and grandchildren. You and I, we think we are smart enough and creative enough and ambitious enough to resist the seismic collapse of the Western Christian church. But to be sure, Newell writes, “the walls of Western Christianity are collapsing...In another twenty-five years, much of the Western Christian household, as we have known it, will be no more. One only has to look around on a typical Sunday in most of our mainstream Christian churches. Who will be there in another quarter of a century?”³ Who will be here in another quarter of a century when I am 65 and you will be...

If you are utterly shattered by that good question, then take a deep breath with me and slowly let it out. We will not be shattered by a question that requires us to wake up. We do not need to be afraid of a question. In fact, we are people who aspire to honor God by asking good questions. And we ask good questions here because they better enable us to seek justice, love neighbors, and welcome all. This is who we are. So let’s hold this question—the one we have to pull out from the closet where we hide all of our personal items before a dinner party because we don’t want anyone to see it. Let it have its own platter right there in the middle of the set table before us. On this birthday of the church, we are in-between what has been and what will be. And we know how the in-between places feel—hope and fear and excitement and grief all sitting in a bit pot together. And we also know from personal experience and from the great resurrection story of our faith that there is abundant life to be had on the other side. We take a breath. We exhale. And we are prepared now to face our future together in truth.

Newell notes “three main responses or reactions to this collapse. The first is to deny that it is happening.” We aren’t going to do that. “The second is to frantically try to

² John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity’s Struggle for New Beginnings*, pp. ix-x

³ Newell, p. xi

shore up the foundations of the old thing.” This is about anxiety and is intimately linked to denial. We aren’t going to do that, either. The third, he continues, “is to ask what is trying to be born that requires a radical reorientation of our vision. What is the new thing that is trying to emerge from deep within us and from deep within the collective soul of Christianity?”

Now that is a very, very good question. Let’s hold that one out and give it it’s own spotlight. Rather than asking, “Is this change going to happen to us here, too?” let’s ask, “As people with the love-longings of God at the heart of our beings, how will we welcome the new thing that is trying to emerge within us? And then alongside the good question and the very, very good question, Newell asks one more, “what is it that we need to let go of to prepare the way for the new birthing [of the church]?”⁴

Here’s the problem: We took church out of the hands of Spirit and put it in the hands of a committee instead; we took something radical and counter-cultural and made church something safe and predictable. It wasn’t just us here in this spot, it was every single congregation everywhere across this country. Particularly for the story of the church in America, we stopped following the Jesus Way and made the challenges and tasks of church interchangeable with culture and empire because we were the culture and the empire. The safety and predictability and comfort is what is dying right before our eyes, and we may rightly grieve the loss of what is familiar. But my friends, all of that is not the story of God moving in the world. Hear me saying: what is of God will not die. What is of Christ will resurrect. And what is of Spirit will come rushing through these aisles and those city streets and our very souls each and every time we make ourselves ready for it. And this Pentecost truth is what we celebrate today. Amen.

⁴ Newell, p. xi