

“The Birthday of the Church” - Reverend Jennifer Adams
May 31, 2009 Pentecost, Year B

Well, here we are on Pentecost Sunday which is traditionally referred to as “The Birthday of the Church.” Pentecost is day on which we celebrate that the Spirit came from heaven, the Spirit came as wind and “as tongues of fire,” the book of Acts says, “lighting upon the disciples” enabling them all to speak in different languages so that they could proclaim the good news of Christ to all people.

There they were, gathered, the disciples who at this point in the story had to still be whirling in their hearts and minds, completely uncertain about what all of this disciple stuff meant. After all, remember how much had happened to these people in a relatively short amount of time. First they had been invited to follow Jesus, to step away from their own lives and to risk discovering what this man and his teachings were all about. And they did – they dropped their nets and jumped in! And then as they followed, they experienced several miraculous healings, they listened to numerous beautiful yet challenging teachings; they participated in the feeding of the thousands, had eaten with the odd, and the hungry and the lost; they suffered through His crucifixion, witnessed resurrection, and then watched Jesus as he ascended into heaven to be with God. I think it’s important to remember on Pentecost that before the Spirit blew through on that day that birthed the church, the lives of the disciples had already been shaken beyond belief.

And I think that’s important to remember because that’s true of us too. It’s easy to jump in at the point of the Spirit coming among and lighting upon us but truth is that we start before that birthday every week. Always. None of us walks through these doors without already having had some experience of God. We’ve all heard some teaching, dropped a net or two in our day, sometimes voluntarily sometimes not. Many of us come here having experienced an occasional miracle and having sat through varieties of shared meals; many of us even know something of crucifixion and resurrection before we get to church to be church. So, like the disciples, we come to this place having for a whole lot of different reasons been shaken beyond belief, with our hearts and minds full of experiences and questions and wonderings. Like the disciples, our stories, our faith stories even start before we walk through the doors and it’s important to remember that.

It’s important to remember, because the miracle of Pentecost, the first miracle of Pentecost is that it’s from these ingredients that church is made, something is born. The ingredient that is you and what you bring and me and what I bring and all of us and what we’ve seen and all that we are and all that we’re wondering or carrying or needing to lay down are parts of what make church church. On that first day the ingredients were Peter and John and Andrew and Thomas and the rest of ’em and all that lived within them and among them. And when they were together in that room, suddenly “from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. “Divided tongues as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.”

So when the Spirit came, it didn’t come as a quiet nor a gentle sort of restful presence smoothing over the edges of this odd group of confused people. It didn’t come and blend them into one tidy little group. The Spirit didn’t ask them to forget where they’d been, or change who they were;

nor did the Spirit explain everything they'd been through in order to help it make better sense. And while we're at it, note a few other things that didn't happen that day that church was born: there wasn't a hierarchy dropped upon them from heaven making them one (not that hierarchy is always bad); there wasn't doctrine poured into the minds of everyone in the room establishing a once and for all unity (not that doctrine can't serve a valuable purpose); there wasn't even a BCP (Book of Common Prayer) put into the hands of each disciple assuring community-making, liturgically and aesthetically appropriate worship, which frankly disappoints my Episcopal soul a little bit.

On that day of Pentecost, the Spirit gave all of these people with all of their stuff just one initial church birthing gift, which was the ability to proclaim the good news of Christ in all directions. The Spirit blew open the windows and doors and infused each person there in ways that immediately gave birth to a holy and wide reaching proclamation of good news. And that's how the church was born.

And so the disciples went in lots of different directions; they left the room and went to the people who were their people, and the people who would become their people and they told others what they themselves were just coming to know. The disciples proclaimed beautiful teachings that would challenge and change the world. They shared that healing happens, through their words and their actions and the telling of their own stories. They announced that the thousands -- the odd and the left out, the hungry and the lost needed food too. And most importantly they shared the news that had shaken them beyond belief -- the good news that no matter what, no matter even crucifixion -- no matter what resurrection comes.

And through them, with God's help the church was not only born, but it grew. And it grew and it grew. The disciples were community, they were people of faith, and they were one in a way that apparently only the Spirit could pull off. Each of them was a vital ingredient, and not only for the sake of themselves, but for the sake of the world too. And it's all of this is also true of us. The church is being born here too all the time.

So, what tongue have you been given? Given where you've been, who you are, what you've seen and heard and are only yourself coming to know. . . Given that resurrection happens and the Spirit is upon you, who are the people that need to hear the good news in a way that only you can tell.