

Happy Birthday, Church!

Acts 2:1-13

A few weeks ago, at a church conference where we were making some decisions about our life as a congregation, I gave a small “state of the church” address, some words about how I see this church almost two years into my being here as pastor. A number of people asked me afterward if I would share my thoughts more broadly with you. I hesitated—not because I don’t want you all to know what I’m thinking, but because I’m reluctant to use this pulpit, and our time on Sunday morning, for church business—or for anything that isn’t focused specifically on what I think I hear God saying to us—to you—about how to live when you’re *not* in church.

But it’s Pentecost—what is often called the birthday of the Church. On Pentecost we celebrate the first day that Jesus disciples felt inside themselves the power to go out and *be* the presence of God in the world. That’s how the Church has understood its charge ever since then. And so maybe this is the right day to talk about what this church is today—how it is still, or could be, the body of Christ in the world. Which is to say: how *we* might be the presence of God here on this corner of Winchester and Hamilton, in Campbell. Because there is no church here that is not *us*. Whenever we say, or think, “The Church should do this,” or “Why does the Church act that way?”, it’s *us* we’re talking about. You are part of that *us*. A few of us are paid to work here, but it’s all of us together—your energy, your passion, the way you sense God calling—*we* are The Church.

The longer I’ve worked around churches, the more convinced I am that everything we do that we call “church”—our buildings, money, organization, time, meetings, even our worship—is just a tool in God’s hands. A good church itself is not the end, or the goal, of anything. Church by itself doesn’t change anyone’s life. Committing your life to the church will almost always be disappointing. Church has value only in the ways it points to something bigger than itself—the presence of God, the way of Jesus.

That means that the ‘why’ of everything we do has to be always at the front of our minds. Every sentence about what we do at church has to have a second half that begins with the words “so that”.

- We put lots of energy and time into this hour on Sundays—including things like snacks and coffee after worship, and even silly gold hats—**so that** everyone who wanders in to this place might get a glimpse what the love and grace of God look like.
- We keep this campus well-maintained and beautiful, **so that** everyone can find hospitality here—a safe and welcoming place—whether they’re here for worship or to pick up food from Second Harvest or to play basketball in Fellowship Hall.
- We organize—into committees, small groups, task forces, teams—**so that** we can be one community focused without distraction on the church’s mission. So that our relationships with one another are clear, and straightforward, and honest. So that everyone knows their voice is valued.

When we work at this project called the church, our goal is not to get more members or more money. It’s not to make The Church a stronger institution. The measurement of our success is not how many people are sitting in the pews on Sunday morning, or even how good it feels to be a member here. Here are the things that matter most:

- Does your connection with this community help you live differently out in the world?

- Does this community, our working together, multiply—like loaves and fishes—the gifts that we have to give away in our homes and schools and work places and neighborhoods?
- Does what we do here make a difference to people who are *not* members of this church— people who may never worship here, but who need desperately to know that there is a possibility of life with hope, forgiveness, second chances, meaning. This is why we sit with children at Rosemary School who are learning to read. This is why we send shoes and scholarships to children in Sierra Leone. This is why we make dinner and serve it to homeless people who are mostly considered “a problem” in our communities.

Our goal in everything we do is to create here a community that looks like a little corner of the kingdom of God. A place where Jesus might be at home among us; where if Jesus were here, he might smile and say, “Oh, I recognize these people! They look kind of like me!”

What does that kind of church look like, concretely, practically? Are we doing it? How would we know if we’re succeeding? I’m not sure exactly. But I want you to know what I see when I look out from this pulpit on Sunday mornings.

I see a healthy community. This congregation is strong. At no small cost, you have been through hard times, refined by fire. What is left is strong roots, good stock. The bonds and trust are strong between you and, I think, among us. I see a congregation that is not stuck. You are ready, even eager, to try new things.

I see a multi-generational community. Sometimes I hear people say, “We are an aging congregation.” Well, I suppose that’s true. I’m pretty sure *every* congregation is aging. That’s what happens when people stay alive. But if you think this congregation is full of *only* older people, you’re seeing something different than I do. I see young people, children, the families of those fifty children who come for Sunday School every week. I see thirteen people who were ready and eager to become new members today; new people joining us for worship each week. Two weeks ago I saw an amazing children’s musical with a full company of young singers and dancers and actors. I see older people too: people who are here because they are very much alive, still growing in their faith, people who know they have much to learn, something to give. The people around here who have lived many decades make this church the wise and generous community it is. You too are part of the vibrancy and new growth here.

I see a diverse community. Other people see it too; that’s often the first thing that people who visit here on a Sunday say to me. It’s a rare thing to find a church that contains and honors multiple cultures the way we are trying to do here. You who are part of the African Fellowship: you grace this church with your presence and your faithfulness. You who have moved over a little bit to make room for new voices and styles, you are helping this church enter new life.

We are still learning, all of us. Becoming a *truly* multi-cultural community is still the challenge before us. We have to work at creating together a new culture, new styles of leadership, new ways of expressing faithfulness. We have pledged to one another to be in this work that is sometimes uncomfortable. But what we are trying to make here is what the kingdom of God looks like.

It's important, and it is good, and exciting. And we are going to stay with those African choruses at the end of worship until all of us learn how to move as if we were born in West Africa.

I see a community that knows how to care for one another. In every new members' class, I ask people what they expect of their church. Often they answer that they hope this will be a community where they will be seen and cared for when they need something: when someone in the family is sick, or in crisis. I am grateful that I can answer them, "Yes. This church knows how to do that." Through our Caregivers team that attends lovingly to members of the community who cannot be at church on Sundays. Through our Welcome Team that reminds us to notice, and then know, one another. Through your care for each other, big enough to let new people in. Just recently, someone who had only worshiped here for a few weeks said to me that the welcome she found here felt like, "We've been waiting for you to arrive."

I see a community with plenty of resources. Our membership makes this church one of the fifteen largest in the California-Nevada Conference. Your regular attendance on Sundays puts us in an even smaller number. As you will see in a few moments, the commitment and energy of volunteers is strong and generous. We do talk about money a lot around here; we ask you often to share what you have. Jesus did the same thing. We talk about money not because the church is in trouble, but because there is so much ministry to be done. And our money—what you give and we spend together is one more way we live out our partnership with God in the work of transforming the world.

For this church, at this time, there is enough. Now that I think about it, maybe that's what Jesus was trying to tell us.

And I see a community that is hungry. For deeper connections. An eagerness to know each other better, to understand the things that make us the same and the ways we are different.

A hunger for holiness, more insight into who God is and what God might be saying to us, to you, in these days. I see in you a hunger for meaningful service, to feel that you're making a difference in the world. And maybe most of all, I sense in you a hunger for time. For a way to slow down, and to find a sense of balance and peace even as you're meeting all of your responsibilities. More than any place I have ever lived, I feel here the scarcity of the resource of time.

And so, for this church, I am hopeful. Are we there yet? Can we say that we're living fully God's hopes and needs for this church? No. Not yet. Maybe never. But again and again, the Spirit comes, lighting on us in ways we can sometimes only describe with words like "fire" or "wind," or "yes." Opening our eyes to things we have not noticed before. Giving us the grace to let some things go, so that something new can come to life.

I'm learning that the role of a pastor here is not so much like the Wizard in the land of Oz, pulling levers, making things happen according to some vision I've come up with. I feel here more like Dorothy: walking with our arms linked, seeking along with you, looking for the signs that call us to the next place, saying "Come on. We can do this. Don't be afraid."

Happy birthday, Church. May the year ahead be full of surprising blessings.