



Roanoke, Virginia
Pentecost: May 28, 2023

“Let There Be Church”

Acts 2:1-4

George C. Anderson

Pentecost literally means “Fiftieth.” For Jews, it is the fiftieth day after Passover when there is held the Festival of Weeks-

a celebration of when Moses was given the Ten Commandments-
and the Word became stone and was carried among us.

Christians celebrate Pentecost because it was on that day when there was a spiritual explosion, the day when the Spirit of God moved disciples out of hiding into the streets of Jerusalem and the Gospel began to spread- like wildfire fueled by wind.

Before I read of that Pentecost, listen to the passage often read along with it. Listen to the opening words of the Bible:

Genesis 1:1-3:

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

Now to the story in Acts of what happened one Pentecost.

Acts 2:1-4:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And 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.

I have a vague memory of something that happened. I just don't remember details and names. Then again, it may be imagination mistaken for memory. I don't really know. But whether from vague memory or imagination, I have a story to tell.

After leading the family to their pew and after sitting through the Prelude, Rev. Olson rises to the pulpit to welcome those who have packed the sanctuary... packed because this memorial service is for Rev. Harriet Simpson. She would still be this congregation's Senior Minister if..., well, this *is* a memorial service. Rev. Olson became the church's Interim Minister when Harriet went on disability.

Rev. Olson begins by saying words about
grass withering,
flowers fading,
God's Word lasting.

Then he says, "Harvey gave me something to read as a word of thanks. I asked Harvey if he wanted to read it himself, but he said, 'No,' that it was Harriet who was called to stand in pulpits, not him, and that he and his daughter Jessica need to remain by each other's side holding on.' So, I'll read what Harvey has to say."

"Jessica and I want to thank you for being here today. Yes, we are grateful for your being here and we hope you'll come to the reception to speak to us, but that's not what we want to say. We hope those who are not members of this church will forgive us, but we especially want to speak to the members of the congregation she served. We want you to know how much it means to us that you are here..., but we also need you to understand *why* it means so much to us.

"We have heard from so many of you. You've told us how inspired you were by Harriet, and how she was a role model for faith and courage. But we want to be honest with you. Harriet was often scared and her faith was shaken at times, but she was determined to be the minister you needed her to be. So, while we appreciate the compliment you pay her in calling her a role model, we don't want you to leave this service thinking that she should be admired for having something you don't have, or being capable of something you can't do.

- Do you think Harriet was sacrificing herself in serving as your minister while living with a diagnosis of something that doctors fought to delay but knew they could not beat?
- Do you think she was so selfless when she continued to visit, teach and preach even while working around surgeries and treatments?
- Do you think she had this wonderful private relationship with God because she continued to have faith even as she was under Hospice Care?



Don't think that way. Her faith was a faith that she and you shared, and many times your faith lifted hers. What courage she had was a gift because you held her up. That's why we're not thanking you for the nice things you have said, though we appreciate them. We thank you for being her church. You held her until only God could. And if Harriet is to be honored, it will be because we remain for each other what you were for her. For we're all going to be shaken at times and we need to hold each other up."

I know, that's a sad story with which to begin a sermon right after celebrating a baptism. Baptism is a time to rejoice. But baptism and death always have been linked in that on both occasions we commit lives to God's hands. What Harvey said in his letter to the congregation is what we promise at baptism. We do not expect Avery/Lena¹ to come to faith in Jesus and live with courage on her own. No, Avery/Lena was baptized into the church and into a shared faith. Her identity as a child of God is to come from growing within a family of God. It is in community that identity in Christ is formed. That is how Christians think.

Or it is how Christians are supposed to think. Americans, with their often zealous belief in individual rights and identity, sometimes get this skewed. Sometimes, we have this notion that we have the ability to define ourselves, and whatever identity we claim on our own, the rest of the world will just have to deal.

Another story. Because of a daily journal kept by the one it is about, it is not one that comes of vague memories or imagination. It is the story told in the book and movie by the same name, *Into the Wild*. Most of you know it.

Christopher McCandless doesn't like the identity he feels is being imposed upon him, nor its expectations and rules. And he has grounds; his family is dysfunctional. He doesn't even like the name he was given so he eventually drops it and tells everyone he is Alexander Supertramp.

Having graduated with High Honors from Emory University,

- Chris turns down his parents' gift of an expensive car,
- secretly donates most of his \$25,000 of savings to OxFam America,
- destroys his credit cards and identification documents,
- and sets off in his Datsun 210 on a journey of self-discovery...
 - all while his parents and sister think he is working a summer job in Atlanta before heading to Harvard Law School.

His vague plan is
to travel to different places to gain experiences
and work different jobs to gain skills

¹ On the Sunday of this sermon, Avery Elizabeth Moore was baptized at the early service and Lena Catherine Grantz was baptized at the late service.



so he can prepare to live for a while by himself in the Alaska wilderness.

Remarkably, though his goal is to live alone, he keeps making friends along the way. At Lake Mead, Alexander (He's Alexander Supertramp now) loses his Datsun in a flashflood but finds friends in Jan and Rainey, married hippies who also are wandering about but whose real search is for each other. Their marriage is failing. Because Alexander helps them rekindle their marriage, they hate to see him leave.

Ron Frantz hates to see him leave as well. He lives near Salton City, California- a widower who lost his family in a car accident. He gives Alexander work, teaches him leatherworking skills, and eventually wants to adopt him. Alexander says they'll talk about it when the Alaska adventure is over.

Finally, Alexander arrives in Alaska. He crosses a stream to get to a remote area and makes an abandoned bus his home. Then the young man who wanted to be at-one-with-nature finds that nature is too much for him to deal with alone. He faces one harsh disaster after another. He thinks of the friends and family he left behind and decides he wants to return to them... maybe become Christopher again. Alas, he can't return because the Spring thaw has turned the stream into a raging river. Starving, he eats poisonous plants he misidentifies as edible. Even as he dies, he writes in his journal. He shares a bit of wisdom that came to him too late:

“Happiness is real only when shared.”

Change one word of that line and Christopher's wisdom is what Harriet knew and what the story of Pentecost is about: “*Faith is real only when shared.*”

Most of you know the Pentecost story but let me remind you what happens in Acts 2. You heard the first few verses:

disciples so inspired

it is as if they are licked by tongues of fire,

disciples so motivated to share their excitement,

it is as if a mighty wind blows them from the room.

They are blown out into the crowded streets of Jerusalem- crowded because Jews from around the Roman Empire have come to celebrate the Festival of Weeks. It is amazing

how bold,

how brazen,

how joyful

these disciples are in telling the whole world what they kept to themselves just the day before. Just yesterday, before the Spirit moved them, they were shaken. Their leader not only died, but died in a horrific way.

But today they are out in the streets telling everyone.

Their fear has been replaced by joy.

Their meekness has become confidence

The secret they kept is now the news they share.



And thousands hear their witness and 3000 ask to be baptized.

Why?

Too many Americans say it is because of individual conversions. Thousands hear and accept the Gospel, make a profession of faith, and are saved. But that's missing the point of the story.

Not that there is anything wrong with individuals coming to faith. We've heard Jesus' parables about the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost son. We remember when Jesus made the crowd wait

while he gave undivided attention to a child

or to a woman who desperately grabbed hold of him.

The individual matters.

But to focus on individuals is like thinking that Harriet's individual faith is the point of her memorial service. The Pentecost story is not primarily about individuals coming to Jesus but about *a body of Jesus being formed*. It is a body within which individuals can find an identity not on their own but in Christ. It is a body in which faith can be shared and courage borrowed.

And despite an over-sensitivity these days to cultural differences, the faith of this community speaks to people in different languages and in different cultures. I am not speaking of some specific confession of faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. I am speaking to what the faith of Jesus and the faith of the community of his followers has to say which so many around the globe and through the centuries have embraced.

- **The faith says this:** Every single person is a creature of God. God spoke and creation came to be. God spoke and life happens. God spoke and humans are created- humans who are like God in that they are given moral vision and a responsibility to take care of each other and the world.
- **The faith says this:** God spoke, and the moral vision received articulation in the commandments given to Moses. There is this vision of human dignity and justice, of ethical behavior coming of right worship of God.
- **The faith says this:** God spoke, and God's Word became flesh. Jesus showed us this, that God lives among us. His words and his actions embody that moral vision. And, as daring as it is to say Jesus is risen, the faith is saying that Jesus remains with us still.
- **The faith says this:** We don't have to invent ourselves. We don't have to justify ourselves. Our search for identity and our place in the world has a starting place. It begins not with a search but with our already being claimed. We can grow into a baptism identity where from the get-go we are God's very own.
- **The faith says this:** We can't lose that identity, even as we bring disgrace to it in the ways we live contrary to the moral vision. As daring as it is to say Jesus died for us, the faith is saying that God meets us not only at birth, and not only at death, but at the point of our sin.



- **The faith says this:** God's Word not only spoke the world in creation, and not only became flesh in the life of Jesus, but God finds a body in communities that live out the moral vision in the world. Some institutional expressions of the church don't do a faithful job of this, but nevertheless, the world needs communities that say what few others are saying: that we find our lives when give up on trying to create our own lasting meaning but find it in loving others as we are already loved. How liberating it is to have removed from us the pressure of the responsibility to find on our own our own identity, create our own meaning, and establish our own significance... all of which would die when we die. But life has meaning even at death because it is a life shared with God.

The Apostle Paul nicely sums it up. Just as the Word became creation, just as the Word became Living Law in the giving of the commandments, just as the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, the Word becomes the imperfect body of Christ when followers join together to love as we have been loved. The community that truly bears the witness of Christ lets the world know that whether we live or die, we belong to God and are called to live that way.

How nice it is on this Pentecost Sunday that we have had a baptism where a child is given into the hands of the body of Christ. And I hope you forgive me for my stories about death, but how nice it is to remember that even at death we remain in the hands of God. In between baptism and death, let's continue to be the community of those who share a faith and who hold each other up in in the privacy of worship and study and in the public witness the streets.

