

May 23, 2021
Pentecost Sunday

Meditation: “Happy ReBirthday!”

I remember my second year at Emmanuel College. I had chosen my courses and my educational advisor had refused to sign off on the courses I had chosen. He called me into his office for a meeting. “What,” he asked, “is this?”

“That’s *Spirituality of the Jewish Year*.” I replied.

“I can see that,” he said, exasperated. “What I want to know is why?”

“Because,” I said, “I wanted to learn about the roots of Christianity.”

“Oh. Okay,” he said, and signed off on my course selection.

Today is Pentecost. In Greek, the language of the earliest written copies of the New Testament, *pentikostos* is fiftieth. If you include Easter Sunday and today, this is the fiftieth day since Easter. In the early church, Easter and Pentecost were THE two major festivals in Christianity. It wasn’t until 336 that a date for Christmas was even set, and even then, the festival was a minor one. The day of Resurrection and the day of the sending of the Holy Spirit were THE two important festivals for the first several centuries of the church. Easter and Pentecost are movable festivals. Pentecost is always the fiftieth day after Easter, but the date of Easter changes every year. The date is set according to a combination of the solar and the lunar calendars. Easter is the first Sunday, following the first full moon, following the vernal equinox (the first day of spring). The big question is, how was all of this worked out?

Easter and Pentecost are the Christian equivalent of two of the three Jewish pilgrimage festivals: Passover and Shavuot. Just in case you are interested, Sukkot is the third Jewish pilgrimage festival. In the Bible, every Jew is supposed to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year. Passover, which is a festival that remembers the night the Israelites were freed from Egyptian rule when God killed the first born of every Egyptian family and livestock, but passed over the houses of the Israelites. Shavuot celebrates the end of the grain harvest, and Sukkot celebrates the end of the fruit harvest. The grain harvest starts right after Passover. First the barley and then the wheat is harvested and it took seven weeks (49 days) to harvest it all. You won’t find the name Shavuot in the Bible, but you will find the festival of weeks, named for the seven weeks of the harvest.

Shavuot is also the supposed day that the Israelites received the ten commandments. The giving of the commandments marks the birth of Israel as a nation; a nation of people chosen by God.

It's not difficult to see the similarities. Passover and Easter were linked. It was the festival being celebrated at the time of Jesus' death. So, it is no surprise to see the link between Shavuot and Pentecost fifty days later. Only, in Christianity, it is not the giving of the commandments and the beginning of Israel as a nation that is being celebrated, but the giving of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the Christian church that is being celebrated. Every year at Pentecost we celebrate the giving of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the church, and it is a process of continual renewal.

This year there is something new going on right here. For the first time both pastoral charges are worshipping together. When Union United Church had to change from being a full-time position to a part-time position it changed the covenant between myself and Union United Church. One of the possible outcomes was that I could have left in search of a full-time position. But covenants are serious things. They are deeper than contracts. They are promises that are made and kept between parties. Rather than seek out a different, full-time position, I sought ways of honouring the promises made by trying to make the position full-time through the addition of another pastoral charge. While things didn't work out exactly as I had initially envisioned, they did work out as I'm sure God had hoped.

My thought in all of this was seeking a way to keep a United Church of Canada presence in smaller communities, because I believe that the denomination has a unique theological perspective that is of value to Canadian society. Many churches have struggled on for years or closed and disbanded while searching for a part-time minister, so putting two part-time pastoral charges together to create a full-time position seemed to be the best way of keeping two pastoral charges alive.

A couple of weeks ago I spent my evening watching interviews with several Christian leaders in what was called a Courageous Church Summit. The leaders were talking about where the church finds itself at this time in history, after more than a year of pandemic exile from our buildings. One of the speakers talked about a recent poll in the US that revealed that 53% of the population did not identify as belonging to a religious institution. That doesn't mean that they do not have an active faith or spiritual life, just that they do not want to identify with an institution. The problem is that people look at the institutions and instead of seeing something that is relevant to their lives, they see something that only seeks its own survival. Lest you think this is only a problem in the USA, we see that same trend in Canada, and we see it not just in the church, but also in service clubs and other organizations like the Masons. The speakers talked about current reality, about the things that they have done over the past year, and also about the future of Christianity and the fate of the Christian church.

All of these speakers caused me to do a lot of thinking. We have been innovative in moving to virtual worship services and in combining two pastoral charges. But what is the point in the long run? What good does it do to keep two part-time pastoral charges alive if all it does is delays the inevitable? It is sort of like using extreme measures to keep a palliative patient alive for another day. If all we are doing is putting off the inevitable, then this is really just a form of cruelty.

God called the church into being for a purpose. God sent the Holy Spirit to empower us to serve, to work for justice for all, to be relevant to people's lives. Like other institutions, the focus has slowly changed from service to the perpetuation of the institution itself. In changing the focus, the church has ceased, or is seen to have ceased, being relevant to people's everyday lives. The alternative to delaying the inevitable end of the church, the innovation of taking advantage of technology to help part-time pastoral charges carry on is an opportunity to rediscover our call, to return to being relevant to the communities in which we are located. The big question is, what does relevant look like in Dorchester, in Thorndale, in Thames Centre, in Union, in Sparta, in Central Elgin? Another way of asking that question is, what is missing in our communities? What are the needs of our communities? What are the injustices that need to be righted? And what can we, the church, do about those needs? I would love to hear from you what you think the needs of the community are. And don't stop at your own observations, talk to your leaders, the municipal councilors, the mayor, the fire chief, and anyone else who is a leader in your community. Ask their opinion about what is lacking, what the needs are from their perspective.

God did not just send the Holy Spirit to hover over the waters of creation, or to hover over the waters of the Jordan at Jesus' baptism, or to alight on the disciples like holy flames. God sent the Holy Spirit to be our continual support, day after day, year after year, millennium after millennium. God is continually calling the church to new life, to rebirth. This day of Pentecost is simply the day of the liturgical year that we celebrate that reality. Happy Rebirthday, church, and may you serve God's call for many more years. Amen.