

Sermon for Pentecost
St. Stephen's Church
May 27, 2007
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Introduction: Pentecost is the occasion to re-connect with the beginning of this creation called the church, and to place our way of being it, beside that.

The seniors were very excited about just about everything that that time of year was bearing. Graduation was supposed to be the centerpiece, but many seemed already to be a bit tired of thinking about their high school experience coming to an end, and certainly more than a few were adopting a strategy of laying low, staying out of mom and dad's incessant "do this, do that" force field and the school's authorities saying "don't do anything" to mess up now. So you couldn't fault some of those seniors saying "I just can't wait for beach week."

As a school chaplain, those were fearful words. Those were words that conjured up all sorts of imaginations of high risk behavior that could put these marvelous children in harm's way, play out the nightmares of stupid decisions, emotional, physical injury, and demeaning, dehumanizing behaviors. Overhearing one such conversation occurring, I just couldn't listen anymore, and I looked at the two students, physically turning them to me, and I said, with finger pointing: "You go to beach week, but let me tell you this: you had better **remember who you are!**"

They were a bit startled, but one recovered quickly and replied: "You know, my parents say that to me all the time; I don't have a clue what that means."

From a father's perspective, it means that you come to understand, deep in your heart – so deep it impacts the way you think, the way you act – that there are lines of behavior that you simply will not cross because you know whose you are, what that means, what values, treatment of others, rules of conduct there are for you because of whose you are.

Now I want us this morning to apply that "Remember who you are!" to this day – this Pentecost Sunday – in this way: the day of Pentecost is the springing forth of this new creation called the Church. It is the descent of the Holy Spirit upon those gathered in Christ's name, adoring him, wondering what to do in his name, knowing that he has ascended to the Father, knowing he promised that there would be a Companion with us, wondering what it means to do what he did – and even more, he promised at one point.

And we – called that same Church in this location and at this time – are rightly challenged in a fatherly way: "Remember who you are!"

So let's scratch our heads like those teenagers, and wonder for just few minutes, "What in the world does that mean?"

Point 2: The Church is the vehicle that answers: **“how am I to be human?”**

You and I, by our baptism into this fellowship, are a part of a monumental force that has flowed across human history for 2000 years; **it is a power** carried into daily lives and societal eras across centuries, across continents, across cultures and it **informs us of the way of being human that we are created to for, destined for, assisted by God’s grace.**

The first thing to get fixed on is to realize what a gift this “happening,” this force is. It is first and foremost all about the revelation that answers the question: “How am I to be human?” It might sound like a silly question, for indeed, I have no option to be anything other than human, because of my DNA. But if you give it some pause, think about the variations there are, the choices there are before us, as we answer, each in ourselves, the decisions we make about how we will do these minutes, hours, days, months, years that are the life we live. Certainly there are confines and limitations to us, but the choice and freedom is even more astounding:

I can be “about” so many pursuits, from money and power, to hedonism and immediate gratification, from self-pity and playing a justifiable role of being a victim to anger and self-righteousness.

I can choose to be a kind person or an important person, a loner or a co-dependent.

I have plenty of choices in my capacities about how I will occupy this body and how I will conduct the constellation of relationships that this life is affording me right here and now.

Just imagine writing your own obituary – how would you be remembered; if you don’t like it, obviously there is still time to do something about it.

We each do “being human” and the power of this force depicted in Acts is that it is a force that speaks to every heart, a power that knows every language in human history. It is universal; and by gosh, it is even eternal.

The Church emphasizes that the path of being human is to do it in community and in communion (the condition of being in relationships where grace unfolds underneath it).

The vision of life as the church bears distinctive marks:

1. The epistle lesson is all about being a member of a community that is structured in the fashion of one's talents and abilities are employed for the good of the whole, and whose gifts and limitations are not grounds for valuation, validation, appreciation.

You are the beloved; you are the beloved because of nothing you do, achieve, etc – you are beloved by definition, as a child of God. (Whether an anger-prone pick-up truck driving, gun-rack laden Georgia boy, or sophisticated, educated, matriculated, graduated, socially elite neurotic!)

And then add to that being beloved **in relationship to all other of God's beloveds!** The message is to more than just what inside the church is going to look like, because what it looks like inside the church is amazingly different from everything else in the world particularly in terms of how to be in relationship with others. Paul's words in the lesson today, "Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (1st Corinthians)

To be fully human is to not be individualistic; rather first and foremost it is to be communal: we humans are fundamentally social creatures! But this society that human beings thrive in – which the Church is created to reveal to the world – is strangely different from other ways of doing community.

To be our best selves is to be in community, and to be in community that does "community" in a very strange way: there is no hierarchy in this community. How strange that is to us; we live and move and have our being in hierarchical fashions of being in community. Think of the different experience of life that people can have!

One of the authors that we read in the Servant Leadership School offered here at St. Stephen's calls this community an upside down kingdom: it's a way of looking at self and others in relationship where there is no hierarchy, there is no "top dog" nor expendable bottom rung of humanity.

Contrast the difference of what it would be like if you are a maintenance staff worker at the building of your employment in contrast to being a senior vice-president in that same building. One is Joe; the other is Mrs. So and So. One is punching a time clock; the other is coming in on their own schedule; think of how Joe is spoken to by other employees compared with how Mrs. Is; think of the pay scale, and how much difference there is in the company's appreciating valuing each.

This is how we live in our society. But it is not what is being created by the dynamics that exist in the assembly of those that become called the church.

You may have noticed that when we have burials out of the church that every coffin is draped in the same pall. The pall is a sign that this child has been baptized in the Lord

and is draped for all eternity in the love of God that forgives sins and opens the gates of everlasting life. There are times when there is some tension around here about that pall being on a coffin; there are families that want “something special” for their loved one who has died. Ornamental flowers, elaborate hangings, something that is emblematic of something their loved one devoted much to. But it won’t happen here; because we seek to be God’s church that values every child, every human being.

We try as well to put this in play in the way we do things around here. We are much about trying to enable people to discern their gifts and how they might employ them in cohorts with other parishioners, other local churches, other assemblies of Christians throughout the world. We don’t succeed. We are still hierarchical. We still send the signals of one person being more important than this one, but I will tell you we try to do otherwise –

And we are shown that it is valuing each person, seeing the dignity of every human being, affirming them and upholding them in good wishes, prayers and joining in with them in mission and formation that we are our best selves.

- 2. The second mark** – and last I have time for today – is that the mark of being of this creation called the Church is that we in it are together about seeing the Father, knowing the Voice, **doing the work that makes the Father known in all the world.**

Philip said to Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time... and you still do not know me? (John 14:8)

The Holy Spirit has come that you and I might know the Living Lord as having the same power on us as it has on those who had the advantage of engaging Jesus face to face. And that is the gift that this vehicle we call the church is principally about. Because the way to be human is finally, ultimately, immediately about having that relationship that forms us each and every day.

Christ calls people out of where they are – ekklesia – and into life that is extraordinary, no matter how ordinary it may seem to be living it. “The Kingdom of God is at hand” is the way he put it. It is a Kingdom, a reality that is lying right before us, like a treasure that is hidden but so very, very near. If only we had the eyes to see! If only we had the ears to hear! That Kingdom of God that is what each of us is really hungering for where we stuff all sorts of other things not just in our mouths, but in our lives; that Kingdom where our best dreams come from; that Kingdom where strength comes from in the darkest moments; that Kingdom where holiness is like a feathery breath across our cheek and we know something is present, yet not what or how; that Kingdom where home actually is. (p. 149, Secrets in the Dark)

At Shrinemont we will likely watch as DVD of Sister Helen Prejean speaking at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wall Street. Sister Prejean is the little Roman Catholic nun down in New Orleans who began to take her faith so seriously that she went to work with the poor. It was the “Trickster God” who said to her that the Kingdom is near to the poor, and so she went and lived in the midst of the poor in New Orleans. Then the trickster God went a step further with her, and a letter came to her from a man on death row. “OK, well if he is on death row, then I know he is poor because the rich don’t get on death row, they get good enough lawyers to worry a prosecutor with so much work that they plead it out.” So she wrote him. And he wrote back, asking her to visit him. And with great reluctance she did, and there, Sister Helen says, “We had an encounter.”

I take those words to point to being in communion with another of God’s beloveds. Being real with one another and “touching” in a spiritual way. Sister Helen says that the trickster God, when you follow Him gets you into extraordinary things that you would never do yourself – all because God so loves the world, that He needs you to love for him.

That’s the Church alive.

This day of all days, let us **Remember who we are as Christ’s Church:**

marked as His own forever, the beloved in community with beloveds,

and driven into extraordinary acts where faith leads us, and grace unfolds underneath us in ways that are more than we can even begin imagine or expect.