

Allow me to be the first to wish you all a very happy birthday today. I bet you didn't know it's your birthday today, each and every last one of you, did you? How can you not know it's your birthday, unless no one ever told you? Unless no one ever told you the story of the day you became someone else's; unless no one ever celebrated you for being you. Then you might not know it's your birthday. Well, let me tell you, today is your birthday, because today is the church's birthday, and seeing as you're all here today, this makes it your birthday.

Let me be clear, when I say today is the church's birthday, I don't mean the building. I've told you the story before of the day this building went up. How it was at first just that one little room schoolhouse behind you. The pastor back in 1858 was a man, but the founder was a woman named Sarah Carpenter. Her vision was to have a church where people, and in particular children, could learn the Bible story as their own. Imagine, a woman starting a church at a time when women weren't even allowed to vote! It must have made for quite the story back then. It makes for quite the birthday story today.

When I got married, I inherited something of a tradition on my birthday. At some point during the day, usually near its end, after all the presents have been opened, the cake eaten, and all the family has gone home, and it's just me left to think about me, my wife, Moira, will say, "So, what story do you want to tell with your life this year?"

Every birthday means the beginning and end of another trip around the sun. With the trip you just took, what story did your life tell? If we were to look back at the places you went, the things you tried and succeeded at, and failed at, the people you spent your time with, what does it all say about you? If we were to ask the sun to tell us what it saw and heard from you this past year, as you passed by it every day, what story would it tell about you? The moments of celebration, of struggle, of heartache, of courage and grace. And what story do you want to tell with your life this year?

But back to the church, whose birthday we celebrate every year on this day of Pentecost. On this day, some 2,000 years ago, the book of Acts records that the Holy Spirit blew her wind through a mixed crowd of people in Jerusalem, and so began the church. For weeks leading up to the day, the disciples were like an expectant mother. Following his death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus told them he would not leave them as orphans but would send them another—an Advocate who would remind them of everything he had taught them, and who, assuming they were to do everything he had taught them, would also help them stay the course. “I’m sending you out as sheep among wolves. To be a force of peace against the forces of violence. To beat your swords into plowshares. Take nothing with you for the journey, that you might trust in the outstretched hand of the stranger, and so learn to be that same hand in return.” Mother Teresa is believed to have once put it this way:

“People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.
If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.
What beauty you spend years creating, others may destroy overnight. Create beauty anyway.
The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.”

In the final analysis, says Jesus to his disciples, the world may hate you because you choose to live your life this way. But I will not leave you as orphans. I will send my spirit to be with you. It will comfort you, encourage you, and every time you doubt the way of compassion and truth, it will convict you.

The only question on the part of the disciples was, When? When will this Spirit come? For them, it can’t come soon enough. Already they have asked Jesus several times, “Is now the time, is now the time when you will restore the kingdom to us?” The kingdom. Naturally, I suppose, this is what they assume Jesus means by the sending of his Spirit, for he has told them to wait for it in Jerusalem, in the capital city that used to be theirs’ but now belongs to Rome. She came in some years ago and took it away from them in what they call an unfair fight. She desecrated their symbols and set up her own government. Not a day has gone by since where they haven’t felt unsafe in their own country. But now, now, “Is now the time,

Jesus, when you will restore the kingdom to us? We have labored long and hard all these months in expectation of change. We are growing impatient. Is now the time?"

In the book of Acts, the contractions come on suddenly and violently. "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 like fire appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."¹

When the Apostle Paul steps into the labor and delivery room to describe the process by which the Spirit gives birth to the church, he uses a word more gentle than violent. "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have *this promise of the Spirit*, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption."²

Adoption. By using this word to describe our relationship to the church, there are three things we can say. First, our relationship to the church is not a birthright. In this community where we have all come maybe for different reasons, in search of different things, none of us get to say we own the place. None of us get to claim the best seat at the table just because our family bought the table; none of us get to have our name alone on the mailbox. We were all adopted. We all belong because someone else chose us. Even before we ourselves knew this was a place we would call home, someone else already decided they wanted us in the family.

The second thing we can say is that we belong to a God who has taken what was not our birthright and God has made it our birthright. It is not a coincidence, I think, that in scripture, the word spirit is a feminine noun in Hebrew and in Greek, reminding us that of all the things God is to us, first and last, God is our mother. When in Exodus, God tells

¹ Acts 2:2-4

² *Italics* my translation.

Moses, “I have heard the groaning cry of my people in slavery, and I have come down to deliver them,” the picture is of a mother who has felt something kicking in her womb, struggling to get out. In Psalm 139, the Psalmist says of God, “It is you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.” And in Romans 8, our passage for today, Paul says, “The spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit stands in for us with sighs too deep for words.” I have often heard told that when a mother hears one of her children cry, she knows what the cry means, because it is like you are hearing your own body calling out to you. So it is with Go, that she knows the cries of her adopted children as if they were her own birth.

The third and final thing we can say is that in the church, where all the children are adopted, you have to work doubly hard to figure out what your family story is. I think of this like one particular corner of my yard at home. My yard is filled mostly with cedar and pine trees, and like most yards, each tree stands alone. However, we have one corner of our yard that is wooded, some would say un-kept. In that corner, the trees have been allowed to grow wild for so long that when you look up, you can’t tell which branches go to which trees. In addition, vines, which have grown up from the roots of the cedar trees, have now wrapped themselves around the pine trees as well. I think I told you a story once before of how I had to cut down one of the small pines not too long ago, but when I did, it wouldn’t fall. It just hung there suspended in air, held up by the vines from the cedar tree. I’m sure someone who knows better than I would say these trees are unhealthy. They’re choking one another, and they’re going to kill each other. But I’ve noticed there is one particular group that doesn’t seem to mind, doesn’t mind at all, how overgrown and un-kept my yard has become. It’s the birds. They have moved right into this corner of my yard, along with the squirrels and chipmunks. Not only do they not seem to notice what is so different between them, but they all seem to be right at home.

On this Pentecost Sunday, allow me to be the first to say, happy birthday. I’m so excited to you have you here in my home. I own nothing, and so everything I have is yours, even the

red balloons. Take one with you today. When people ask where you got it, be sure to tell them, and that we have one for them, too.