In This Pivotal Moment, to Become the Church

Acts 2:1-21 and John 15 and 16

Pentecost Sunday

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Faith Ev. Lutheran Church

Glen Ellyn, Illinois

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No doubt you’re aware by now that our congregational leadership has appointed a task force Faith to explore how we as a congregation will move forward to keep our ministry vibrant and vital as we move into an uncertain future. We have been meeting for about 3 months, reading, praying, studying scripture, and having conversation. Last Sunday the members of the task force shared some of their experiences at an Adult Forum. One of the members began her comments by saying that she came on to the task force because she likes the way Faith is, she is terrified of change and wanted to make sure that nothing changes. When she paused, mild applause broke out in the room. She tapped into a nerve; for a lot of people, there is something very comfortable and comforting about this place, and they really don’t want to see anything change. More than that, I think, they fear losing something that is valuable and meaningful to them.

What I’ve been trying to say, though, is that we are not looking to change things at Faith; what we are looking to find is the way forward when there is change all around us. As one tiny example of the sea change I offer this: last week, the Pew Foundation came out with the results of a follow-up study to a 2007 ground-breaking study that showed how our culture is becoming less and less Christian. The number of people who claim no religious affiliation continues to grow rather dramatically. This is the reality we face. We are not looking to change; we are trying to discern our call to ministry in the way of Jesus when the culture around us is changing so dramatically. How do we be the church in these days? What does it mean for us collectively to follow Jesus in the present reality of this world?

Here we are on Pentecost Sunday, when the very first disciples were holed away in a room in Jerusalem awaiting instructions on how to be the church, what it meant to follow Jesus in the present reality of their world. The Holy Spirit would come, they were told. They had no idea what that meant, but they followed the instructions. They waited. When the thing promised finally came, they could not have imagined what it would be like. The rush of a violent wind filled the house where they were sitting; tongues of fire rested on each of their heads; all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages. Then the Spirit thrust them from the house where they had been waiting into action. They took the church from the building where they had been waiting and into the streets.

What happened in the streets was miraculous, divine, unprecedented. Travelers from all over the known world, gathered in Jerusalem for the harvest festival, pilgrims from every known land there to offer their sacrifices in the Temple, those pilgrims now heard the gospel of Jesus preached in their own native languages. The ragtag band of Jesus followers which included likes of fishermen and a tax collector and a religious revolutionary — all of them became public speakers, proclaiming the new thing that God was doing in Jesus of Nazareth. They were thrust into the world to do new things, unexpected things, things to proclaim God’s redemptive, reconciling, and healing love and grace. Those disciples were on the ground making present the Kingdom of God. At in that pivotal moment they became the church of Jesus Christ.

What is rather shocking is that all of this happened in Jesus absence. In the gospel lesson, Jesus delivers the devastating news to his disciples that he was going away. And even more difficult were his words that it would actually be better for them if he were to go away. “It is to your advantage that I go away,” Jesus said. “For if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you.” I’m afraid the disciples might have argued that point; the last thing they wanted was for Jesus to go away.

In his absence, however, he promised the Spirit. The Spirit is the presence of Jesus when Jesus is absent. Through the Spirit, Jesus promised to remain alive in the community of God’s faithful people, in this gathering of the saints, in the hearts and lives of each us baptized children of God.

Now, through the Spirit, God is calling us to a way of life that allows the Spirit of truth to penetrate to our very being and to form and shape us in the Truth. To live in the Truth is to let the way of God and the purposes of God become unconcealed, uncovered. To allow the Truth to be revealed among us is not subject to rational process. It is, rather, a process of discernment. It involves prayer, formative reading of scripture, conversation, theological reflection. The work belongs to the Holy Spirit; our effort begins with listening — to each other and to what is happening in our community and in the world, and in doing so, to be listening to the voice of the Spirit. Such work requires openness; it requires making space in our individual lives and in our congregational community for quietness and silence; it requires creating space to engage with the mystery of grace, it requires an attitude of receptivity, and a sense of awe and wonder.

This posture is not something we are very good at. We have been educated in a culture of efficiency. We do not learn to be patient to allow the truth to be drawn out. When we were in school, there were subjects we had to learn, facts that had to be memorized, and exams that we had to pass. In fact, our educational system has been more and more directed to competency in a standard body of knowledge where teachers are more and more forced to teach for the sake of helping students to demonstrate competency on standardized tests. Whatever is not useful is not valuable; whatever is not practical is a waste of time and money.

The lessons this morning tell us that the most important things in our lives and especially in our life together are not things that are learned, but things that are revealed. Just as a great novel can lead us to deep insights about ourselves, so, our living together in prayer and reflection on the great stories of our faith reveal the leading of the Spirit for us in this time and place. These reflections and conversation do not necessarily immediately lead us to practical steps about what to do; rather they lead us to deep visions of reality, of who God is, of how God is at work. They lead us to think differently about our call to be the presence of God’s kingdom in the world, to see with the eyes of faith how we can be a part of God’s big work. They invite us to the gifts of God in this word and in these sacraments; they invite us to listening and discernment. Only then do they thrust us into the streets, as the Spirit did on the first pentecost.

There are those who say that the church is dying. I heartily do not agree! These are challenging and wonderful times for the church and in particular for our congregation. I know there’s anxiety. There is fear. But I also see vitality and life, hope and eager expectation. As we seek to discern the way forward, we do so trusting in the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Crucified and Risen One whose death and resurrection has made all of this possible. He has given us the Spirit, who since the beginning of time has guarded and guided God’s people to be a shining beacon of light and hope for a fallen world. The Spirit teaches us to find God where we are, to serve God where we are, to see life as Jesus intended, and to serve so that the world might more fully conform to God’s intentions. Listen. Listen. God is calling. The Spirit speaks into our hearts the presence of Jesus. And with that presence, we, too, in this pivotal moment become the Church of Jesus Christ.