

Sermon – Sunday, June 5, 2022

Rev. Randi

Today is the feast of Pentecost. When we think of the big feast days of the church, we quickly name Christmas and Easter, yet we sometimes forget about Pentecost. Pentecost, however, is essential. It verifies Christmas, and it is a continuation of Easter because, with Pentecost, Christ is born in our very own bodies. With Pentecost, the church is sent out to proclaim the message of Jesus's life and love to the world in whatever way is necessary for others to hear it.

The idea of Pentecost originated in Judaism. It was a feast that occurred 50 days after Passover, and it meant that the people were to offer new grain to God. It also was the anniversary of the giving of the Ten Commandments. The rabbinic tradition is that God gave the Ten Commandments with a single sound. When the voice of God went forth, it was divided into seven voices and seventy tongues so that everyone received the law in a way they could understand and accept it. The law was meant to guide the people of Israel, and in our Christian tradition, the Spirit allows the people to receive the message of God's salvation in words or ways they can understand. The Spirit is meant to guide us --- the church – as we proclaim the message of God's love throughout the generations.

Pentecost reminds us of who we are as the church and what we are to proclaim. We also are reminded that the Spirit didn't just fill God's people once 2,000 years ago, but it constantly renews us as individuals and as a church. It guides us in proclaiming God's love in ways that a changing world will understand. We don't often actually see fire behind each person. But the Spirit is always with us and sometimes guides us into new ways of proclaiming the Gospel. It is a Spirit of renewal and action.

God speaks to the capital "C" church through the Spirit and through the little "c" church on the congregational level. I invite us this week to reflect on the ways the Holy Spirit has guided both the capital C and little c churches in mission during times of change. I'd like to share two examples from my own experience to start that reflection.

I once served as a Christian education director in an affluent, primarily conservative suburban parish. The parish was in transition and seeking to call a new priest. After receiving resumes and narrowing the pool down to five candidates, the search committee approached the vestry with a question. The question was as follows: "Out of the five finalists, three are gay. We know that you told the diocese that you were open to accepting priests regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation. Before we go any further, we want to be sure you really mean that."

When the question was asked, a long silence followed. Finally, two people spoke, and both said they didn't feel the church was ready for a gay priest. They were sorry and had nothing against gay people, but they just didn't think the time was right. It looked as if the vestry would tell the search committee to eliminate the gay candidates from consideration.

And then one vestry member spoke very eloquently. She said that part of our theology is that God constantly creates a new thing. The search committee had gone through a holy discernment process and had come up with five names. The church had to trust that the Spirit was in that process. She continued to say that God might know that one of those gay priests would lead the church into a new era of mission beyond what any of them sitting there could dream of. To eliminate these people from consideration would be to limit what the Spirit might well be calling that church to do in the future. To eliminate these people from consideration might be ignoring a great gift.

After she spoke, the vestry was silent for a minute, but the Spirit in the room was evident. Ultimately, the vestry voted to tell the search committee to proceed with giving full consideration to all five candidates, including the three that were gay.

I have another example that has dramatically influenced my theology of what the church is called to be today.

I served briefly with a friend who took over a church that seemed to be headed toward closure. It lacked a sense of mission.

Then, one of its vestry members lost his home. He worked a regular job and lived in the neighborhood. The problem was that the cost of housing was rising so quickly that he couldn't afford housing and still pay for food and transportation. Since he needed transportation to get to his job, he chose transportation.

The man's plight was the nudging of the Spirit on that congregation. The church realized that many people in the neighborhood were in the same boat as this vestry member. Hardworking people were losing their homes because of rising prices. Gradually, the church realized that God was calling them to act to alleviate homelessness. Through a long series of steps, the Spirit led them to demolish their church building (which was too large for them to take care of) and instead build housing for working people who couldn't otherwise afford to live in the neighborhood. They built their new church on the ground floor of the midrise apartment building.

The Holy Spirit nudged both these churches toward proclaiming God's message in a new way – one that their communities would understand. The message is still the same as it was on that first Pentecost. God offers salvation to all, and the church exists to proclaim that salvation. Yet, the world is constantly changing, and God always creates anew. The Spirit nudges us today toward proclaiming the message in a new way – the way our community needs to hear it to accept it.