SERMON
Day of Pentecost
June 12, 2011

Acts 2:1-21
Psalm 104:24-34, 35b
1 Corinthians 12:3b-13
John 20:19-23

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

Birthdays are days when we celebrate the anniversary of the day we were born. When we are children, we look forward to birthdays. We can’t wait until our next birthday. Usually we get some really cool presents. We get to have all of our friends over for a party, and we get to eat cake until we’re sick to our stomach.

When we’re young, it seems like an eternity between birthdays. Think of it; during the time between our first and second birthdays, we’ve doubled our age. Then there are those special birthdays that we really look forward to. They’re milestones in our lives.

When we’re 5, we begin school. When we’re 13, we become a teenager. When we’re 16, we start to drive. Parents love that age. When we’re 18, we graduate from High School and either go on to college or enter the working field; at least that is what is hoped. When we’re 21, we officially become an adult.

But then after that, things seem to change. We seem to lose that sense of excitement for birthdays. The birthdays that end in zero become somewhat important. We turn 30 and notice that either we’re starting to lose our hair, or we begin to find a few gray ones.

Many people are married by then and have children. We start to realize that life is not so fun anymore. We have responsibilities. Life takes a more serious tone. We’re no longer foot loose and fancy free.
Then comes the dreaded 40. We think, “Oh my gosh, I’m half way to 80! Our joints start to ache. We can’t fit into our old summer clothes anymore. We panic, and start to do anything to try and recapture our youth.

We dye our hair. We begin reading articles about the pros and cons of Viagra. We start doing research about liposuction, tummy tucks, and Botox. We trade in the family mini-van for a sports car.

Then we hit 50, and we realize that our life is on the down swing. We realize that we are probably closer to our death than we are to our birth. We begin to get advertisements for AARP. We forget about trying to look like we are in our 20’s anymore, since we know that that’s not going to happen. Instead we begin to look forward to retirement.

Then come the 60’s. We enter the golden years. We are now an official senior citizen. Birthdays come and go. They come around much quicker than we would like. Sometimes we have to think back to what year we were born to calculate how old we are.

We then gracefully move into our 70’s and 80’s. The pace of life slows down. We again enjoy the simple things in life. We worry about who will take care of us when we can no longer care for ourselves. We begin to think about the next life – a life where there will be no more aches and pains; no more hardships and suffering. For those of us who are people of faith, a sense of peace quiets our hearts.

I talk about birthdays because they are so much a part of our lives. Today, we celebrate the biggest birthday of all. Today is the Day of Pentecost. It is the birthday of the Christian Church. It is the day we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit in a dramatic way. You see, there was no church before Pentecost. There were just a small group of frightened followers of Jesus.
According to The Book of Acts, the apostles remained in Jerusalem after the Resurrection appearances. They were a small group of devoted believers, but they had no direction, no power in their message. But that was soon to change.

For on the Day of Pentecost they were gathered in one house when the Holy Spirit came upon them, sounding like a mighty wind and appearing like tongues of fire upon each of them.

All of a sudden, they miraculously began to speak in foreign languages, attracting the attention of foreign Jews who were amazed to hear their native languages spoken by Galileans. This set the stage for Peter’s sermon that resulted in the conversion and baptism of about 3000 people. Now that must have been one powerful sermon!

But wasn’t this the same Peter who heard Jesus say to him; “Get behind me Satan”? Wasn’t this the same Peter who had recently denied even knowing Jesus 3 times? Wasn’t this the same Peter who had been on the run for the last 50 days afraid of being arrested for being a follower of Jesus?

Now here he is, boldly proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ right in the face of those who would persecute him. The difference was, is that he had received the Holy Spirit.

It was not that Peter all of a sudden became very charismatic, some great public speaker. Rather, it was God, in the Person of the Holy Spirit, speaking through Peter. It was the birth of the Church, for Jesus said to Peter; “Upon you Peter, I shall build my Church.”

You see, Peter has no authority apart from the Church – the Church that was established by Jesus himself. Indeed, none of us have any authority apart from the Church.

So today we celebrate the birthday of the Church. The Church is almost 2000 years old. Now like a young child; in its younger days there was a sense of excitement. For the first two or three hundred years, there was a lot of growth in the Church.
Then the Church had a mid-life crisis. During the middle ages, the Church began to lose its sense of mission. There were separations and divisions.

First it was the split between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Then it was the Protestant Reformation.

Even so, during these past 500 years, Christianity has been the dominant Religion in the world. But perhaps in a way, we have become over confident. After all, who needs to depend on the Holy Spirit any more if you are number one? Therefore, in some ways the Church has lost its sense of mission and purpose.

Recently, however, scholars are saying that we are entering a post-Christian era. We are not the giant that we once were. Christianity is now being seen as irrelevant by more and more people. The Christian Church has become a dinosaur nearing extinction in some countries. In Europe, statistics show that only about 10 percent of the population attends worship on a regular basis.

And the United States is not far behind. More and more people are retreating into their own spirituality away from the Church that Jesus established. We hear statements like; “I don’t need the Church to believe in God.” I have heard on numerous occasions people say; “I don’t believe in organized religion.” My response to that is usually; “Oh, I see, so do you then believe in disorganized religion?”

So what’s the problem? Well, as I see it, it is a “Church” problem, not a “Jesus” problem. Jesus is more intriguing to people today than he ever was. People today are fascinated with Jesus. Just look at the events that have taken place in the past few years.

There was the remarkable controversy over Mel Gibson’s movie “The Passion of the Christ”. There was the extremely popular book and movie “The Da Vinci Code”, based on an old notion that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and they had a child together, and that Mary and the child escaped to France and became the center of a vast secret cult.
Then there was the incredible success of the “Left Behind” series of books that have sold more than 40 million copies and helped set the stage for what some journalists are calling the “rapture mentality” of many in America.

So what is happening? Maybe Jesus is still relevant today after all.

In our Gospel story this morning, Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection and “breathed on them and said to them, ‘receive the Holy Spirit...’” Jesus “breathed on them”.

What is that all about?

There is a Latin word “spirare” which means to “breathe into”. This is where we get the word “aspiration”. “Aspiration” means to “inhale”, to “breathe in”. This is the “breath” that Jesus gave to his disciples. “Aspiration” also means “an intense longing for”. Another word that is similar is “inspiration”.

Do you see how this works? The breath that Jesus breathed into his disciples “inspired” them to be bold – to go out without fear to proclaim the good news of the coming of God’s Kingdom.

There is a wonderful phrase I came across recently. It’s “Caesar’s breath.” I understand that it is actually a scientific term, more or less. It refers to the reality that the air we have in our atmosphere never actually dies or disappears.

Therefore, since the moment of creation, a certain amount of air has always been here in one form or another. For example, the molecules of Caesar’s breath, exhaled by the ol’ Emperor over 2,000 years ago—that energy, that air—is still with us somewhere in our atmosphere.

Perhaps one of us, in other words, has actually breathed in Caesar’s breath at some point in our lives.
Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “As human beings we all breathe star dust left over from the creation of the earth. We breathe brontosaurus breath and pterodactyl breath. We breathe air that has circulated through the rain forests of Kenya and air that has turned yellow with sulfur over Mexico City. We breathe the same air that Plato breathed and Mozart and Michelangelo…

Every time we breathe, we take in what was once some baby’s first breath and some dying person’s last. We take it in, and when we breathe out it carries some of us with it into the next person, or tree, or animal, who uses it to live.”

Therefore, we also have the breath of Jesus that is alive and working within each and every one of us. As Christians, we call this breath, the Holy Spirit. And because God’s Spirit lives within us, we can have peace in our lives and live without fear.

So what does that mean for the Church? I believe that the Church is going through a stage of transformation that has not been seen in centuries, if not from its beginning. And it is not just the Christian Church; indeed it is happening in all religions. And for some people, this is causing a great amount of fear and uncertainty.

Thus, you see the rise in fundamentalism, not only in Christianity, but in Islam, Judaism, and most other world religions.

In Islam, fundamentalists are doing everything they can, including the use of violence or terrorism to stop the infidels because they are afraid of the collapse of the only culture they have known.

You see, fundamentalism is based out of fear. In our own country, Christian fundamentalism is on the rise because people are afraid of the unknown. So they cling desperately to what they regard as the great pillars of their own faith. They then place their trust in a belief that the world will come to an end – a “rapture” will take place to rescue them from this new threat.
That’s why the “Left Behind” stories are so popular. They convince frightened believers that the world is about to come to an end because their old religious culture is under siege.

These fundamentalists scare people into believing that our government is trying to destroy our faith by not allowing prayer in public schools or by taking the words “under God” out of the Pledge of Allegiance. But this is not where our faith comes from. Our faith comes from the breath of Jesus that is within each and every one of us.

Therefore, during this time of rapid change in our world, we have a great creative opportunity. For the “inspiration” breathed into the apostles all those centuries ago is still alive today. This breath – the divine Spirit of God – will lead us into forming a new Christianity for a new age.

And as a result we will experience new understandings of the world, and new theologies and ethics. We will see new forms of worship and devotion. We will become more inclusive in our understanding of what it means to be a human being on this earth, created in the image of God, and called to care for the creation that God has blessed us with.

Indeed, nothing will look the same after this revolution. But the spirit of Christ will still be there, shaping a new world for our children and their children and their children after them. And therefore, we can have hope.

Come Holy Spirit. Let your breath inspire us to proclaim the coming of your Kingdom into our presence. Amen.

May the peace that passed all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.
How many of you have ever had a birthday party? Do you look forward to your birthday?

What is it that you celebrate at a birthday party?

What kinds of things do you do at a birthday party?

   Eat cake, Invite Friends, Sing songs, Play games, Tell stories

Did you know that today we are celebrating a birthday? Guess who’s birthday we are celebrating today? THE CHURCH

After Jesus rose from the dead he spent a few weeks with his friends and his followers. But then he went to a place where they could not see him anymore. We call that Ascension Day. But Jesus did not leave them alone. He promised to send them the Holy Spirit.

Can any of you tell me who the Holy Spirit is?

The Holy Spirit is God’s breath alive inside of us. The Holy Spirit gives us power and courage to tell others about the Good news of Jesus. We receive this Holy Spirit when we are baptized.

So today we celebrate the day that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to his believers. Do any of you know what we call this special day? PENTECOST

Pentecost is the day the church was born. So today we celebrate the birthday of the church. Do any of you want to guess how old the church is? ABOUT 1,975 YEARS OLD. That’s pretty old. Do you think we can fit that many candles on the cake?

But the good news is that the Holy Spirit is alive in you and in me. Just as much as the day the church was born. Because all of us here today are the church. We are the ones that God chose to help people in the world and tell people about Jesus.

Let us pray.........