

The Day of Pentecost  
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Some very smart people have spent a great deal of time and ink on the question: “What is the essential nature of the church?” Is the church a beautiful building? Is it the group of baptized people gathered together? Is it the mystical body of Christ? What exactly is it?

For the authors of the New Testament, the word church just means something like “assembly.” Kind of like a small political or trade gathering. For later thinkers, the Church—can you hear the capital C—is a slice of heaven on earth, the Bride of Christ, near-synonymous with the kingdom of God. For the leaders of the Reformation, the church is more like a necessary evil...something that we have to put up with until Christ returns. Our current presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, likes to talk about our church being the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement. Not a building or an assembly, but a movement.

I have no idea which of these ideas is right. They likely all hold some kind of truth; it's possible that no one definition is going to get at what the church fundamentally is and that each has its own merit.

Putting aside these important differences for a moment, as far as I can tell, everyone agrees that the church is something new, something different from anything that existed before. Everyone agrees that the church, properly understood, was born on a day, more than two thousand years ago, when friends of Jesus were standing around in the streets of Jerusalem, wondering what to do next, and were very much surprised by the Holy Spirit.

Imagine Jesus' friends, eyes wide open with fear, when wind and fire descend upon their heads. Jesus had promised them that an Advocate would come to be with them, but he was a little short on the details. The disciples had no way of knowing what their little group of twelve would look like after Jesus departed. Who would be their leader? How would they carry on the work of Jesus? Little did they know the answer would arrive so dramatically. On that holy morning, fifty days after Easter, they found out. As the fire of the Holy Spirit comes down, they had their ears opened and began to understand all the people in the city, even though they spoke different languages. As the Holy Spirit arrived to inspire and direct this fledgling group of apostles, Peter, their leader and the great-grand-daddy of the church, began to preach and quote the prophets.

This is how the church is born. In fire and wind and prophecy, and not a little bit of chaos. I like that idea that the church has a birthday, rather than an inauguration or a first day of work. Not these but an actual birthday. I'm fairly far removed from the reproductive process, but I'm told that giving birth is surprising, agonizing, scary and beautiful all at the same time. And so it is with the church. Fire and holy chaos.

It's important for us to note, I think, that the church, our church, did not begin with endowments, yearly budgets, stained glass, pledge drives, sign up sheets—many of the things we take for

granted. These, by the way, are all good things. They're just not at the CORE of what the church IS. At its core, the church is a group of people upon whom the Holy Spirit has descended to grant power and wisdom to go into the world, preaching, teaching, healing and sharing the love we have of God.

The disciples who were surprised by the Holy Spirit on the streets of Jerusalem—they were just like us. People following Jesus and trying to figure out how to be faithful to God in their own lives. They weren't super heroes or people of special faith or abilities. They were just average folks like us, trying to make a decent life—when the Holy Spirit came and changed everything. We can't really stay the same after the fire of God comes for a visit.

I might take a stab with the other theologians at trying to say what I think the church is. Of course, it is a movement. Of course, it is the Body of Christ. Of course, it is a slice of heaven on earth. But on the day of Pentecost when we celebrate the birthday of the church, maybe it's instructive to think of the church as a party.

If you'll allow me to beat an analogy to death, the church has gifts, candles, joyful people, special clothes, presents and, probably my favorite part of birthday party, a wish.

We the church wish for a world much closer to the one envisioned by the prophets—a world of just interactions between people, care and dignity for those who live at the edges of society, a world free of greed and violence. We, the church, wish for a world where the love of God is written on every heart and a world flooded with compassion. The church today is bold to wish for these things, even when they can seem impossible.

So, good people of God and members of the Church of Christ, remember that you have been invited to the best party on the planet. There is no bar for admission. There is no one to check whether you really belong. It is in the nature of the Holy Spirit to invite us and inspire us. And it is in the nature of the church to respond with love and with celebration. There will be days ahead when we're called on to roll up our sleeves and get to work to mend the breaches of this broken world. But for today, the Holy Spirit has come down upon us, and we will party—with songs, with peace, with bread and with wine. We will celebrate together the gifts of the Holy Spirit here among us. And we will announce to the world our wish for a just world, a peaceful world, a Godly world. Happy Birthday, church. You are looking really good for two thousand some years old. Amen.