

Pentecost Sunday
The Rev Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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One of the quirks of the ordination of priests is that, even though you're supposed to know what you're doing when the bishop lays hands on your head, you actually don't. I was ordained on a Sunday night, and then the following Wednesday morning, I was called on to celebrate my first Eucharist at 8 a.m. in a tiny side chapel with just four people present.

I put on my white robe and my fancy silk outfit, and I walked out, frightened, into the little chapel where I was supposed to be a priest. The candles were lit. I placed my sermon on the little lectern and opened the prayer book to the proper page. I had taken a pencil and written all over my prayer book so I would know where I was supposed to stand and when I was supposed to place my hands where. And even though usually at a small service, an experienced priest would give a sermon kind of off the cuff, I was too nervous, and so I had it all typed out and ready to go. I imagine it was too long, and I probably was a bit wooden because I was nervous I was going to do it wrong.

The chapel was one of those old-fashioned ones where the altar faces away from the people, and so when I was saying the prayers at the Eucharist, my back was to the congregation of four people. But right in front of me was a huge mosaic of a saint, who was kind of looking down on me with all of his golden judgment, watching for me to make a mistake at my first Eucharist. Or that's how it felt anyway.

But, the thing is, I actually got through that Eucharist. And now I say something like 80-90 Masses a year, and between you and me, if you woke me up in the middle of the night and told me to lead a church service, I could probably do it with all of 30 seconds preparation. In fact, once, a guest preacher didn't show, and I had to give a sermon completely cold and just hope that the Lord provided the words necessary for the occasion.

And, so, on this feast on Pentecost—on the church's birthday where we celebrate the way the Holy Spirit has come down on the heads of Jesus' friends, giving them the power they need to be the—I want to focus less on the power and might of the disciples and more on their beginner status as Jesus' followers.

I present, for your consideration, the idea that the disciples had no idea what they were doing. They had done an internship for a while with Jesus, but they weren't really ready for prime time. They were good at bickering, and they knew a lot about fishing. But on the whole, they really weren't ready for being the church in the world.

But here's the secret: no one is ready to be the church in the world. The job is too big, maybe even impossible. It's like one of those three-page job descriptions that no one could possibly fulfill. And yet, the holy spirit comes down on the heads of dreamers and misfits and beginners. I

can see it out there, sitting on all of your heads. Wreaths of fire coming down from heaven and letting me know that you have been called to do good work in this world.

But what if I don't feel prepared? You might say to me: Well, the disciples didn't either. Every priest you have ever met had no idea what they were doing. Every Christian you have ever met was at one time a beginner, a novice. But when you are chosen for this work, my hope is that you will answer the call, even if you feel a little nervous.

I was talking to a parishioner the other day, and I told him that I don't get as many phone calls as you might think from people in the parish telling me ideas they have for a ministry—be it something that would be social, or for worship, or for service in the community. I think in the Episcopal church, we are sometimes a little quick to wait and see what the rector has in mind for a fresh ministry. And, there's nothing terribly wrong with that—I like to think I have good ideas now and again. But the thing is that the Holy Spirit didn't just land on rectors. It landed on the heads of the entire church, and the power to live into God's reign is in all of our hands—not just the few in the special outfits. Martin Luther famously wrote that the first role of the priest is to administer the sacraments, but that their second job—and a close second—is to empower the laity for their ministry

So, if we believe the story of Pentecost, and I find that I do, then the power to do our work here in this world is right here among us. It is living in all of you as a fire. I want you to take this story seriously this week. I want you to spend a little time with your eyes closed thinking about whether the Holy Spirit is calling you to something wonderful in the church. Maybe you're being called to participate in the summer of service, or in our new contemplative worship service, or in our capital campaign. Or maybe, you're being called into a new ministry that we don't even know about yet and that is waiting to be born. I don't know the answer, and you may not either, but I know that God has laid a call on your head, and I for one, would like to hear about it.

So, Happy Birthday church—you wonderful, mystical, imperfect, lavish, sometimes silly, and beautiful vessel for the spirit of God's love. Happy Birthday, and many Happy Returns. Amen.